

The Global State of Democracy 2023

The New Checks and Balances



Global State of
Democracy Initiative



THE GLOBAL STATE OF DEMOCRACY 2023

The New Checks and Balances



International IDEA
Strömsborg
SE-103 34 Stockholm
SWEDEN
+46 8 698 37 00
info@idea.int
www.idea.int

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International IDEA
Strömsborg
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SWEDEN
Tel: +46 8 698 37 00
Email: info@idea.int
Website: <https://www.idea.int>

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Abbreviations

ACDEG	African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance
ACHPR	African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
AU	African Union
CI	Countervailing institution
CSO	Civil society organization
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EMB	Electoral management body
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GONGO	Government-operated non-governmental organization
GRECO	Group of States against Corruption
GSOD	Global State of Democracy
INE	Instituto Nacional Electoral, Mexico
KPK	Indonesian Corruption Eradication Commission (Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi)
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and asexual
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NHRI	National human rights institution
OAS	Organization of American States
PIF	Pacific Islands Forum
RECs	Regional Economic Communities
RTV	Radio-Television of Slovenia
TSE	Tribunal Supremo Electoral, Guatemala
UMNO	United Malays National Organisation
ZEC	Zimbabwean Electoral Commission

Foreword

The people must be sovereign.

Democracy is an unending argument about democracy itself. When free citizens argue, we are often arguing not just about what policies or parties we should support, but about what democracy means. Our own positions aren't stable. How each of us defines democracy depends on what situation we are facing and what fundamental interests are at stake. When a society confronts existential crises—war, invasion, terrorist attack, economic collapse—citizens of all ideological stripes will argue that institutional limitations on the people's authority, like rule of law, checks and balances or a free press, must be ignored or over-ridden. The people must be sovereign. All power must rest with them, and the majority must prevail. If not, the people will perish. In conditions of crisis, people search for strong leaders, and the most persuasive rationale for strong measures and strong leadership is majority rule. Even when the crisis is not existential, would-be tyrants and budding authoritarian populists know that the surest way to secure power in a democracy is to deploy the language of the majoritarian imperative. When they do so, however, they risk damaging, even abolishing, democracy altogether.

This produces the most worrying political trend in the world today: 'democratic backsliding', the erosion of checks and balances and constitutional freedoms in nominally democratic societies.

In Hungary, Poland, Turkey, Slovakia, Israel, and the United States, just to name the most familiar examples, the erosion of democratic norms has been engineered by leaders claiming to speak in the name of, and with the authority of, the people. Authoritarian leaders usually justify undermining democratic checks and balances by claiming that some crisis demands that security and order prevail over every other consideration. When democracies 'backslide', the majoritarian version of democracy prevails over the liberal version, the one where power checks power to keep the people free.

These two versions—majoritarian and liberal—have been battling it out since the French Revolution. This conflict is unending because what we want from democracy changes over time and changes as we pass from one crisis to the next. It's an illusion to suppose that 'liberal democracy' will prevail simply because citizens will always put their freedom first. It depends on context and the severity of the crises that democracy faces. Not even liberals will defend all the power-limiting institutions of liberal democracy if the crisis it faces is existential.

It's also mistaken to suppose that there is only one definition of democracy that applies in all times and places. Countries as similar as Canada and the United States have different democratic systems and they disagree on such fundamental democratic values as the right to bear arms and the right to public

health. People's attachment to democracy is not abstract: it is a commitment to 'their' democracy, its national character.

The fact that democracies differ so fundamentally makes it difficult to create international indices of democratic development and retrogression. Indices purport to mark democracies on the same set of scales. This report compares them on measures of representation, rights, rule of law and participation. This enables citizens and policymakers to compare their country's performance and learn from those that are doing better. This is useful, with the proviso that rights and rule of law, for example, may mean different things in different democratic societies.

Besides enabling comparison of national performance, reports like this contribute to our understanding of how to improve democratic functioning. This report's major contribution is its broadening of the concept of 'countervailing institutions'. We are all familiar with the basic architecture of liberal democracy: separation of powers, checks and balances, constitutional rights, rule of law, and freedom of the media. Another longstanding indicator of democratic health is the size of the 'civic space' that governments allow for NGOs and private bodies to advocate for change. To these familiar institutional guarantees of democratic freedom, this report draws attention to independent government regulators, ethics commissions, electoral management bodies, anti-corruption commissions and public broadcasting systems. This captures an under-appreciated feature of the modern liberal state: official bodies funded by government that nevertheless have independence guaranteed by statute or charter. At a time when a major threat to democracy is the steady consolidation of power in the hands of the executive, the independence of statutory government bodies from executive interference is a critical guarantee of the freedom of the citizen.

I would recommend that the next edition of this report adds universities to its list of countervailing institutions. Like the government bodies mentioned above, universities, both private and public, have their autonomy guaranteed by statute or charter, and their autonomy is critical to the ability of their teaching staff to research what they want and teach what they believe students need to learn. In this way, universities perform a critical function in safeguarding democracy. They educate citizens, train society's future leaders, and curate, preserve and create the knowledge that society uses to make its public policy choices. These roles give universities considerable power, and this makes universities a prominent target of authoritarian populists everywhere. Real authoritarians in Hungary and Turkey and wannabe ones in the United States have made the autonomy of universities, and the freedom of their researchers, a central part of their attack on the counter-majoritarian institutions of liberal democracy. It would be very useful for next year's report to include universities as one of the critical countervailing institutions of our time.

Besides enabling comparison of national performance, reports like this contribute to our understanding of how to improve democratic functioning.

Michael Ignatieff

Rector Emeritus, Professor of History, Central European University, Vienna

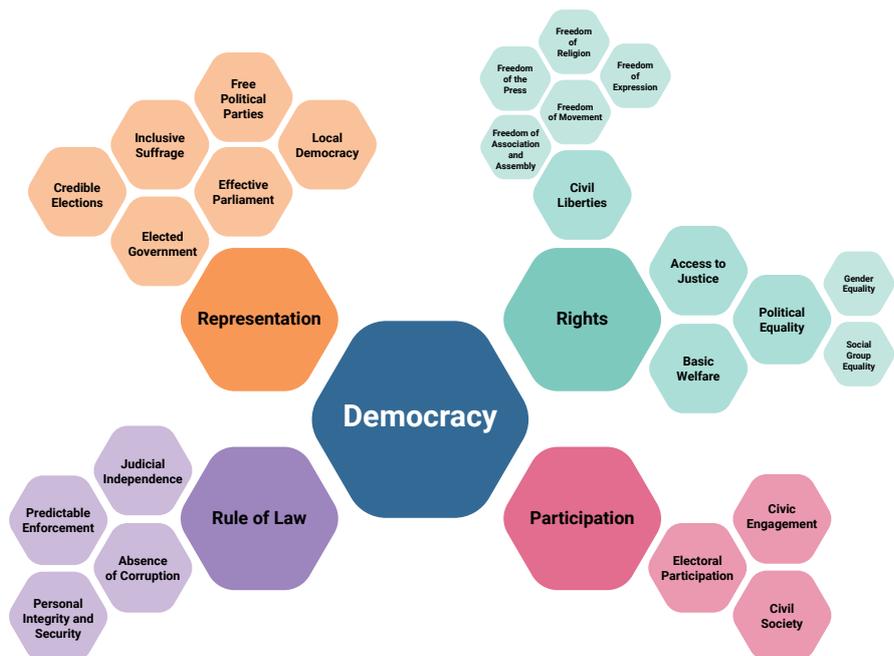
Preface

International IDEA is well known for policy-relevant knowledge production that draws on top-tier comparative research and the remarkable expertise of our global staff. The *Global State of Democracy* (GSoD) Report represents the flagship of this effort, and I am very pleased to present the 2023 edition of this report.

From the very beginning, International IDEA's GSoD Initiative was designed with an emphasis on analytical detail and nuance. Both the geographic and the methodological scope are broad, reflecting the complexity of democracy. This year, we have continued to refine our approach, with two important changes.

First, we now rank countries within each of four restructured categories of democratic performance—Representation, Rights, Rule of Law, and Participation—rather than classifying regimes on an overall basis. (Figure P.1) This change prioritizes nuance by acknowledging that countries perform to different levels in different categories, and improves the specificity of the ensuing policy recommendations.

Figure P.1. The Global State of Democracy conceptual framework



Note: For this Report, the names of the four main categories of democratic performance and their factors are capitalized, when used as such.

Second, this year's GSoD Report draws on both the longstanding GSoD Indices, which measure democracy at country level across 28 concepts, as well as our new Democracy Tracker, which monitors democratic developments in 173 countries on a continuous basis. This unique combination of quantitative and qualitative information further finetunes our assessment, improving the accuracy and relevance of the findings presented in the Report.

Democracy is a dynamic phenomenon, the specifics of which vary across countries and contexts. There is no single clear threshold for democracy and countries improve or decline on different democratic factors over time. With this Report we intend to pay more attention to democratic change rather than to democratic level; to the measurement of specific aspects of democracy rather than average democratic performance; and to the nuances of democratic practice rather than to general normative labels. In our view, trends and nuances are the stuff good policymaking to enhance democracy is made of. The new approach presented in this year's Report seeks to make our findings more policy relevant, even if it tells a more complex story. In doing so, it represents International IDEA's latest contribution to a much-needed global conversation on the state and the fate of democracy.

Kevin Casas-Zamora
Secretary-General

**Democracy
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The global state of democracy in 2023 is complex, fluid and unequal.

The global state of democracy in 2023 is complex, fluid and unequal. Across every region of the world, democracy has continued to contract, with declines in at least one indicator of democratic performance in half of the countries covered in the Report. Measured in terms of the areas of improvement and decline within each country, 2022 was the sixth consecutive year in which more countries experienced net declines in democratic processes than net improvements. This six-year pattern of decline is the longest of this kind since our records began in 1975. In short, democracy is still in trouble, stagnant at best, and declining in many places. But there are a few green shoots of hope (notably, corruption falling and surprisingly high levels of political participation). Indeed, while *The Global State of Democracy 2023* shows some declines in countries that had been thought to be healthy democracies, at the same time there were encouraging improvements in countries where the level of oppression has been constant for years.

Against this background, this year's Report highlights the role of so-called countervailing institutions in stopping the erosion of democratic institutions and reacting to the entrenchment of authoritarian forces.

The term goes beyond the traditional understanding of 'checks and balances' to encompass those governmental and non-governmental institutions, organizations and movements that check the aggrandizement of power and balance the distribution of power to ensure that decision makers regularly integrate popular priorities into policy.

Countervailing institutions include relatively new entities, such as human rights organizations and electoral management bodies, as well as civil society networks, popular movements and investigative journalists, which all play an irreplaceable role in ensuring democracy continues to be of and by the people.

International IDEA analyses democratic trends using four top-level categories of performance: Representation, Rights, Rule of Law and Participation. It

found notable declines in Representation (including in Credible Elections and Effective Parliament) and in Rule of Law (with declines in Judicial Independence, and Personal Integrity and Security). These setbacks were seen in every single region of the world. They corresponded to events such as the continuing wave of coups d'état in Africa (most recently in Niger and Gabon) and the collapse of representative institutions in Haiti.

In the Rights category, overall declines were not significant, but stagnation at a low level is not a situation to celebrate or tolerate. Moreover, many countries experienced declines in Freedom of Expression and Freedom of Assembly and Association, sometimes connected to deteriorations in security. In such contexts, the fundamental enabling conditions of democracy, including opportunities for debate and dialogue (which drive innovation), are at risk of disappearing. The diverse ways in which these declines find expression range from the extreme measures against organized crime in El Salvador to the misuse of laws against misinformation in many countries in Western Asia.

Turning to the Rule of Law category, after many years of stagnation in levels of corruption, there were improvements in countries across all regions. The picture was not unambiguously positive, however, because many of the countries making progress combating corruption—for example, Angola, Benin, Burundi, Kazakhstan and Mexico—are facing challenges in other indicators of democracy. Nevertheless, initial indications are positive.

The most encouraging category was Participation, where scores remained surprisingly high even in countries with a low level of democratic performance at an institutional level. While there were still more countries with declines in Participation than advances, the picture here was much less negative than in other areas of democratic performance. As the Report details, there are also encouraging cases in many countries where political participation has had policy impacts.

Using these categories, the Report looks at five regions: Africa, Western Asia, the Americas, Asia and the Pacific, and Europe.

In Africa, the quality of Representation has fallen, as the continent has been affected by both acute declines following unconstitutional changes of government (including coups d'état) and chronic declines where authoritarian leaders and parties have sought to prolong their time in power. Yet, while African countries continue to perform below the global averages for many indicators, the continent has emerged as a bastion of strength in the category of Participation—even in countries where other indicators present a dire situation for democracy.

While the overall picture of authoritarianism in Western Asia persists, there have been shifts in both authoritarian practices and the pro-democratic

The most encouraging category was Participation, where scores remained surprisingly high even in countries with a low level of democratic performance at an institutional level.

responses to them.¹ The region is especially notable for the proliferation of new forms of electronic surveillance and repression. Even so, pro-democratic popular movements have challenged entrenched powers in countries across the region, in spite of a range of dangers and threats. Corruption has presented a persistent challenge to democratic growth in the region, as illicit exchanges and patronage networks have eroded public trust in institutions—even in the countries that hold competitive elections.

Most of the countries in the Americas continue to perform at a mid-range level across many indicators. Representation is an area of relative strength in the region, as many countries score highly when it comes to Elected Government. However, several countries in Central and South America are increasingly faced with declines in Rule of Law and Rights, as a result of severe problems in protecting judicial independence, ensuring social equality, and maintaining civil liberties and public safety. The longer-term threats to democracy that these situations entail need attention.

Across the diverse countries of Asia, a broad decline in democratic quality appears to have halted, apart from the significant exceptions of Afghanistan and Myanmar. However, civic space remains under threat, as Freedom of Expression, Freedom of the Press, and Freedom of Association and Assembly have declined across many countries. A combination of long-term problems with the effectiveness of legislatures and a lack of judicial independence has meant that innovative and informal institutions and practices have taken on the role of limiting government power. Democracies in the Pacific area, which is a renewed focus of geopolitical tension between the United States and China, also saw no significant declines. But they may begin to see their institutions being tested by these outside pressures.

Europe remains the world's highest-performing region, led by a number of consolidated democracies. However, from these high starting levels there have been significant declines in specific indicators of democratic performance in many of these established democracies, signalling that it is not wise to be complacent. More hopefully, in recent years, several countries in Central Europe have made significant progress in democratic performance, particularly in the Rule of Law category. Even so, threats to peace and democracy from authoritarianism and democratic declines in the region remain painfully apparent. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has galvanized support for democracy in Europe, but made clear what is at stake when democratization efforts fail—as they have in Russia.

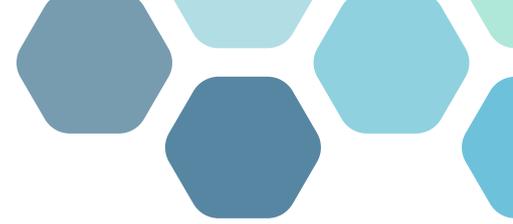
What can be done to address the threats to democracy, both acute and chronic? *The Global State of Democracy 2023* policy recommendations include: support for electoral processes, focusing on mechanisms that guarantee fair contests and participation; transparency and access to information in legislatures that would multiply the sources of accountability; full commitment

¹ The text of this report was finalized before the outbreak of violence between Israel and Hamas in October 2023 and therefore does not take these events into account. As with all other countries, the quantitative indicators reported here cover only events before 31 December 2022.

from governments to protect civic space; and legal protections for the independence of institutions that protect elections, investigate corruption and supervise government programmes.

The gears of democracy continue to turn, although it may be that the centre of democratic machinery is shifting away from the traditional core institutions of representation to other bodies, organizations and movements.

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INTRODUCTION

Since International IDEA published the first *Global State of Democracy* (GSoD) in 2017, successive reports have tracked democratic trends across a tumultuous period. During this time, producing the GSoD Indices and accompanying reports has frequently been a process of documenting democratic decline and stagnation while picking out bright spots that could portend a reversal of fortunes. There have been dispiriting and tragic outbreaks of civil war or state collapse in Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Haiti, Myanmar and Sudan. The GSoD Indices have also documented the entrenchment of authoritarianism in Belarus, Cambodia, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Russia, Venezuela and elsewhere. Even the quality of established democracies has eroded, with executive powers trying to suppress countervailing institutions (CIs) so as to hoard power.

The complex array of problems facing the world includes climate change, migration, war and political violence, as well as growing levels of inequality despite many millions of people being pulled out of poverty. To that list is now added a completely new set of multipronged threats associated with the growing normalization of artificial intelligence.

For the past six consecutive years, more countries have been experiencing declines in their democratic quality than have been improving.

For the past six consecutive years, more countries have been experiencing declines in their democratic quality than have been improving, with 2021 the worst year on record. As the worst of the pandemic waned, Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine sent shockwaves around the world, with its impact extending to the cost of living, food supplies and security. The war continues today, testing the resilience of democratic powers in the face of naked aggression.

The Global State of Democracy 2023 provides an update, looking primarily at changes between 2017 and 2022. But this Report also argues that countering democratic declines depends on innovative ways to bolster the institutions, movements and organizations that keep power distributed between the branches of government and ensure that people's priorities are presented to

and heard by decision makers. Specifically, this Report examines the role of CIs in what have been the most important recent global and regional advances and declines in key indicators of democracy.

COUNTERVAILING INSTITUTIONS

CIs are the set of governmental and non-governmental institutions that balance the distribution of power between the branches of government and ensure that popular priorities regularly and consistently feature in decision making.

They encompass what are traditionally understood as ‘checks and balances’ within the formal structures of government (between the executive, legislative and judicial branches), but they go beyond this in important ways, focusing more on the balance of power between the people and the government than on power-sharing within government.

They also include myriad organizations, institutions and popular movements that act to protect equal access to and public control of decision making, such as civil society and other political institutions (ombuds offices, anti-corruption commissions, electoral management bodies or EMBs, ethics bodies, etc). While ‘checks and balances’ refer solely to the three branches of government (Gordon 1999), CIs include the organizations, groups and bodies that help control power from outside the structure of the government (Bulmer 2019).

Independence is critical. Threats to these institutions’ independence are the first signs of attacks on democratic integrity, irrespective of whether such institutions are formal (such as the judiciary or EMBs) or informal (such as civil society). Such threats may take the form of institutionalized coercion and power being held by one person (Western Asia), or state capture (Central Europe). A critical focal point is the courts, which are stepping in around the world as parliaments in many countries where there is a struggle to check executive power. The courts’ ability to maintain the balance of power in government, though, is highly dependent on judicial independence and the rule of law, both of which have experienced notable declines around the world.

Cross-institutional collaboration is also key. Institutions do not operate in a vacuum and even the most effective among them cannot claim sole credit for successes. They depend on the support of other institutions with different comparative strengths and skills. Key examples include: the joint efforts of civil society, the courts and the legislature (in some cases) to protect and further gender and sexual rights around the world; the collaboration between independent media, civil society and voters in Slovenian efforts to bolster the independence of its public broadcaster; and the work of civil society, free media and the anti-corruption commission in Malaysia in the fight against corruption there.

CIs are the set of governmental and non-governmental institutions that balance the distribution of power between the branches of government and ensure that popular priorities regularly and consistently feature in decision making.

Figure I.1. Countervailing institutions



These issues are especially pressing as people struggle under the daily burden of the high cost of living, compounded by the threat of an international debt crisis that could risk the social programmes that so many people, especially the most vulnerable, depend on ([Hamill-Stewart and Chainey 2023](#); [New York Times 2023](#)).

Democracies and the CIs that are central to their functioning must rise to meet these new challenges all over the world. The CIs are the gears of democracy, with actors changing their speed as needed to maintain an equilibrium between power and voice in democratic states. Just as a bicycle rider shifts gears to more easily climb hills, ride faster or coast through a particularly peaceful stretch of road, democratic systems rely on various CIs exerting more or less influence, depending on the nature of the political terrain, to keep democracy on a steady path forward.

It is important to note that CIs exist in non-democratic states as well. In fact, research shows that, even in ancient monarchies, the public was able to act as a check on unjust rule by threatening to withhold labour or violently rebel ([Satia 2023](#)). As recently as late 2022, the Chinese Government eased a strict Covid-19 lockdown policy in response to widespread protests ([Huang and Han 2022](#)).

An important difference, however, is that CIs in non-democratic contexts may not be equally protected by law and therefore may not be able to be relied upon when needed. Government-operated non-governmental organizations (GONGOs) are an example of how groups that may appear to be independent, and thus able to check government power, are not always as they seem. GONGOs have been documented in all regions of the world ([openDemocracy 2003](#); [Naím 2009](#); [Matvienko 2021](#)). They demonstrate the importance of undergirding the de jure and de facto independence of groups that are meant to be wholly separate from the government.

The remainder of this Report analyses the work of CIs through key indicators in the GSoD dataset, as follows:

- the performance of legislatures is measured through scores for Effective Parliament;
- the performance of the judiciary is measured through scores for Judicial Independence and/or Predictable Enforcement;
- the integrity of elections and the performance of EMBs are measured through Credible Elections;
- the work of fourth-branch institutions like anti-corruption and human rights commissions is measured through Absence of Corruption, Civil Liberties and Civic Engagement;
- the work of the media is measured through Freedom of the Press; and
- the work of civil society organizations is measured through Civil Society.

Box I.1. What are countervailing institutions?

Countervailing institutions (CIs) include governmental and non-governmental institutions, organizations and movements that check the aggrandizement of power, balance the distribution of power between the branches of government, and ensure that decision makers regularly integrate popular priorities into decisions.

CIs may include the following:

Formal CIs:

- legislative and judicial branches of government;
- supranational institutions, including regional and international bodies;
- political parties, who may act as watchdogs in the legislature, especially when in opposition; and
- elections.

Independent regulatory and oversight CIs:

- electoral management bodies;
- anti-corruption commissions;
- human rights commissions;
- ombuds offices; and
- independent media.

Informal CIs:

- civil society organizations, faith-based organizations and popular mobilization/protests, which ensure that people's priorities are heard and factored into elite decision making;
- trade unions, which protect workers from exploitation and ensure that their interests are integrated into decision makers' priorities;
- educational institutions, which provide critical outlets for association, expression and mobilization of public interests; and
- private sector bodies, which can take a public stand to voice their priorities on issues of the day.

Box I.2. Countervailing institutions at work

In many cases, CIs act to ensure that the various branches of government check each other and remain within the bounds of their legally defined roles. A clear example is the United States Supreme Court's decision ruling that the 'line-item veto' power held by the president, which allowed the chief executive to cancel specific parts of congressionally approved bills, was unconstitutional ([Clinton v. City of New York 1998](#)).

In Israel, ongoing mass public protests over the government's reforms to the judiciary reflect concerns that the changes will undermine the Supreme Court and weaken its powers while concentrating an abundance of authority in the government ([Haaretz 2023](#); [Stopler 2023](#)).

CIs also work to protect the public's equal ability to control decision making and decision makers. In India, farmers protested for a year against government plans to change the rules around the pricing, sale and storage of agricultural products. The proposed changes would have removed many of the controls that had protected farmers from free market vulnerabilities. In response, the government backed down, agreeing to abandon the reforms ([Mashal, Schmall and Goldman 2021](#)).

Similarly, the Georgian Government's decision to halt its plans to enact a 'Foreign Agents Law' was partly the result of opposition party and public protest against it ([Lomsadze 2023](#)).

Chapter 1

GLOBAL PATTERNS

Key findings

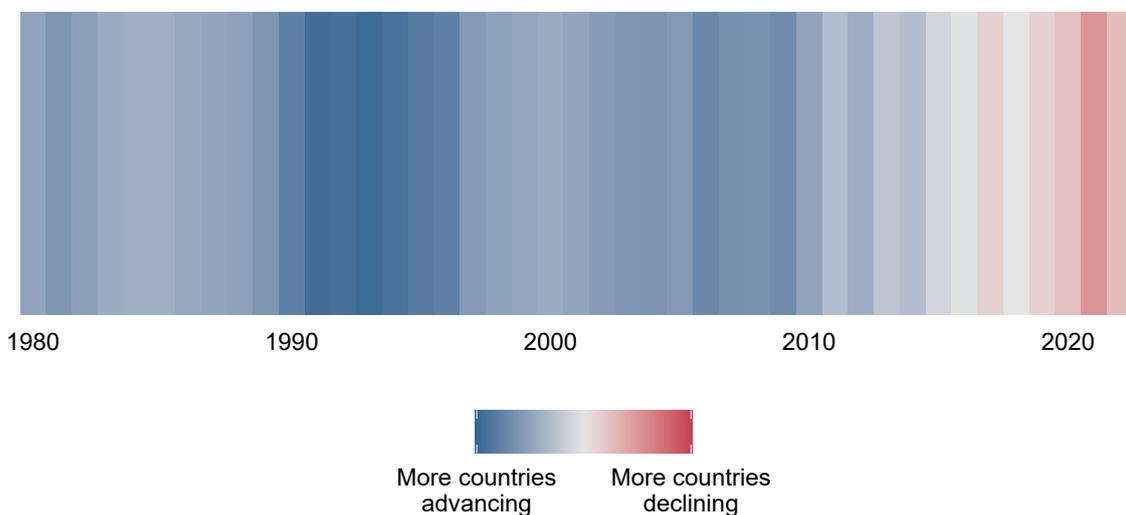
- Democracy continued to weaken in 2022. There were declines in a least one indicator of democratic performance in half of the covered countries. Looking more broadly, more countries experienced net declines in democratic performance than saw advances—for the sixth year in a row.
- These broad declines at the aggregate level have been seen in Representation (Credible Elections and Effective Parliament) and Rule of Law (Judicial Independence, and Personal Integrity and Security) in every region of the world.
- On the plus side, 2022 saw some improvement in efforts to weed out corruption, especially in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, and Europe. The gains were limited, but are signals of positive change; they will need substantial support to maintain.
- Deteriorating respect for rights, including declines in Freedom of Expression, and Freedom of Assembly and Association, was also present in all regions.
- A bulwark against democratic deterioration was found in the presence of countervailing institutions—both formal and informal—to check the concentration of executive power and help the people remain in control of decision making and decision makers.
- People’s engagement with countervailing institutions—which range from civil society protests to voting to engagement in community organizations—motivates progress, even if it is initially tenuous. This public participation, even in contexts that are dangerous and unstable, is the hope for the future of democracy.

1.1. INTRODUCTION

In 2022, GSoD data show that countries with net declines in democratic performance again outnumbered those with net advances, as has now been the case for six consecutive years, with 2021 the worst year on record.² This six-year pattern of decline is the longest of this kind since our records began in 1975. Half of the countries have suffered a decline in at least one indicator of democratic performance. More broadly, the intensity of democratic gains that had seemed so promising around the turn of the century has dulled over the past two decades. While the current trend is alarming, the monumental gains made from the mid-1970s to the early 2010s have not been erased by the recent decline and the world remains almost as democratic today as it ever has been. The issue is how to contain and reverse the recent declines.

This shift is illustrated in Figure 1.1, with vertical bars showing that global net improvements have not been seen since 2016.

Figure 1.1. After many years of democratic growth, the world has experienced a democratic recession for at least the past six years (graph shows the net number of countries advancing or declining)



Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

² We calculate net changes by subtracting the number of factors with a negative five-year change from the number of factors with a positive change over the same time period.

Figure 1.2 shows the countries that experienced the greatest number of declines over the last five years (those with declines in more than five factors). These are:

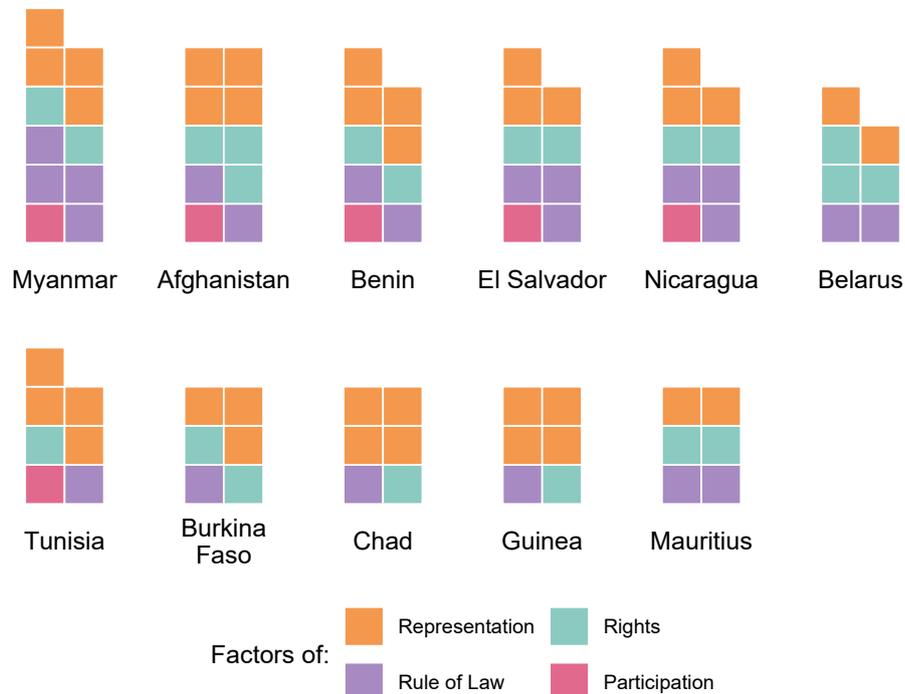
- in Africa: Benin, Burkina Faso, Chad, Guinea, Mauritius and Tunisia;
- in Europe: Belarus;
- in the Americas: El Salvador and Nicaragua; and
- in Asia and the Pacific: Afghanistan and Myanmar.

Figure 1.3 shows the countries that experienced the greatest number of advances (those with advances in more than five factors). These are:

- in Africa: Ethiopia;
- in Europe: Armenia and Moldova; and
- in Asia and the Pacific: Malaysia and Maldives.

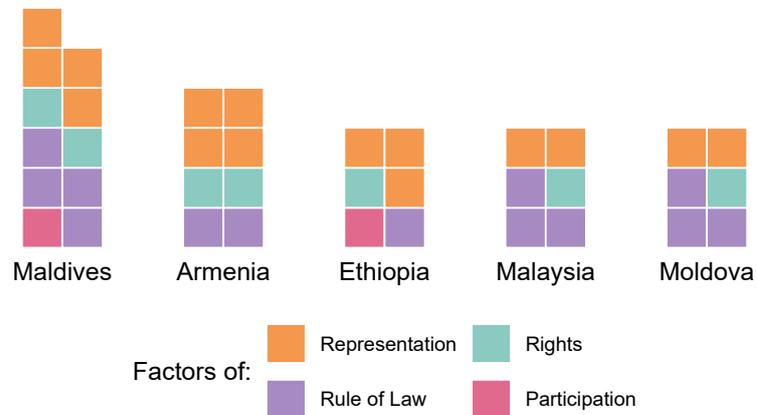
Notably, however, some of these advances have taken place amid a challenging broader context.

Figure 1.2. Countries with the largest number of declines at the factor level (comparing 2017 with 2022)



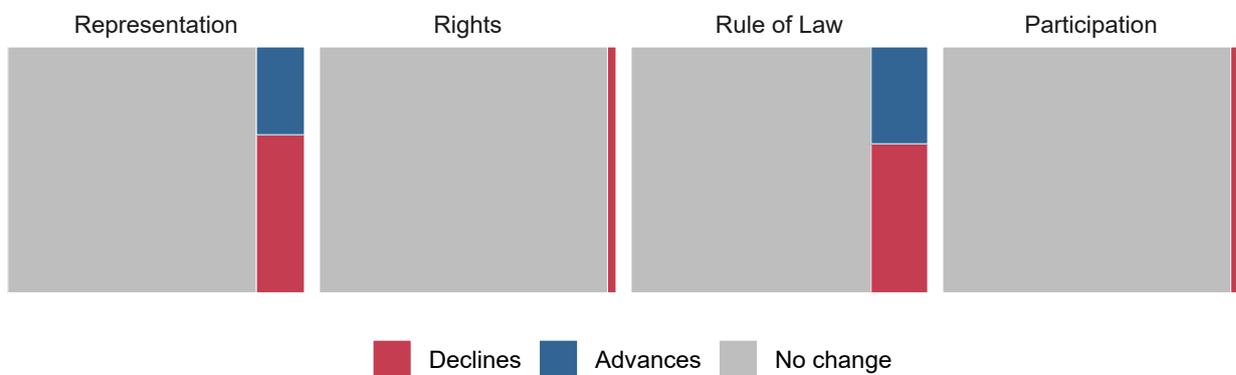
Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

Figure 1.3. Countries with the largest number of advances at the factor level (comparing 2017 with 2022)



Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

Figure 1.4. At the aggregate level, it is clear that declines have been greater than advances between 2017 and 2022 and that previous global democratic growth has slowed significantly (coloured areas show the proportion of all countries in each category)



Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

Figure 1.4. illustrates this overall trend starkly. Aggregate gains in Representation, Rights, Rule of Law and Participation have been scant over the last five years.

These broad declines, found in every region of the world, have been largely driven by the significant weakening of formal CIs, notably elections, legislatures and judiciaries. The deterioration in these institutions is a blow to the heart of democracy. It limits, respectively, people's ability to 'throw the rascals out', elected representatives' power to ensure that the executive does not step out of bounds, and judges' duty to uphold the law in fair and equal ways.

Figure 1.5. Several factors related to Representation, Rights and Rule of Law are among the most affected over the last five years (coloured areas show the proportion of all countries in each factor)



Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

Over the same period from 2017, respect for core democratic rights has weakened, with declines noted in Freedom of Expression, Freedom of Assembly and Association, and Personal Integrity and Security. Figure 1.5 illustrates these changes over the last five years.

This particular combination of factors in decline is worrying, portending a bleak outlook of restrictive environments in which people do not have the freedom to gather, interact, debate and discuss with each other. Over time, such circumstances could wear down the ties that bind people together, potentially having a greater impact on levels of civic engagement in the future, as people are less willing to risk their security to be active members of their societies. Ultimately, such an environment could harm the innovation that is borne of deliberation, exchange and diversity.

This weakened democratic foundation, however, has not been left to crumble. In many cases, other CIs have stepped in. For example, courts and fourth-branch institutions—EMBs, anti-corruption agencies, ombuds offices, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and national human rights institutions—have both checked the concentration of power and helped ensure that the people remain in control of the metaphorical bike handles, despite the uneven terrain.

The work done by CIs has prompted limited improvement in some countries under the Absence of Corruption factor, where the number of significant advances was double the number of significant declines at the country level. Africa leads with the largest number of country-level advances in this area, followed closely by Asia and the Pacific, and Europe.

These limited gains do not diminish the continuing challenges involved in combating the global scourge of corruption, nor are they a promise of a more systematic and long-term trend of improvement. In many cases, positive change was observed in countries where the overall level of corruption continued to be high when compared with high-performing countries. It is important to note that the gains in this area must be understood as limited—initial signals of positive change that will need substantial support to maintain. In some cases, they may point to an opportunity to identify and act on new lessons learned.

Finally, public participation remains the brightest hope for the future of democracy. Despite no new aggregate advances in the category Participation, there is a continued resilience in people’s commitment to making their voices heard, even in the face of physical danger and serious political instability.

Movement in this regard is a testament to democracy’s unique capacity for change. Combined with the growing relevance of informal and fourth-branch institutions around the world, the centre of gravity for democracy, which has always been in the balance of powers between the three main branches of government, may be shifting slightly towards a locus of activity in the courts and independent and regulatory bodies.

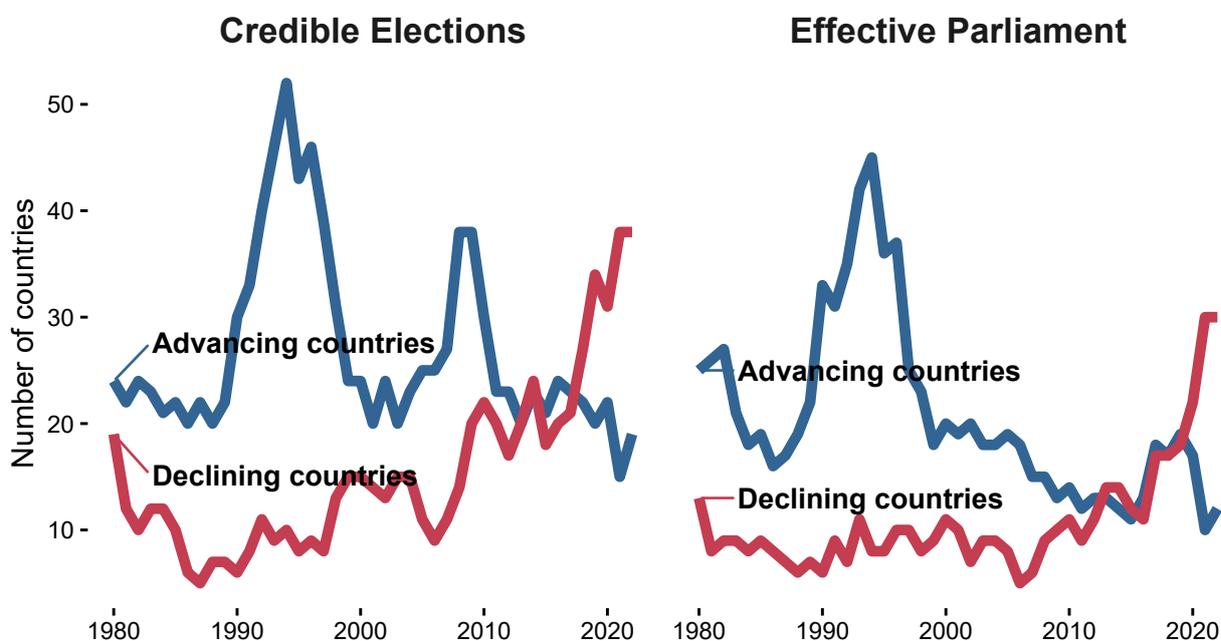
Going forward, this particular combination of institutions could become a new core set of democratic institutions.

Representation is an aggregate measure of the credibility of electoral processes, the effectiveness of legislatures and the quality of local democratic representation.

1.2. REPRESENTATION

In the GSoD Indices, Representation is an aggregate measure of the credibility of electoral processes (including elections that are free from irregularities, political parties that are free to operate, the inclusiveness of the right to vote and the extent to which national offices are filled by elected individuals), the effectiveness of legislatures and the quality of local democratic representation.

Figure 1.6. Countries with declines outnumber those with advances in both the Credible Elections and Effective Parliament factors (graph shows the number of countries advancing or declining, 1980–2022)



Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

As the wave of democracy that swept aside authoritarian regimes in the late 20th/early 21st century recedes, it leaves behind a worn and crumbling foundation. Over the last five years, the world has witnessed the most widespread, significant declines in two of the bedrocks of democratic governance: Credible Elections and Effective Parliaments (Figure 1.6).

In many contexts, electoral processes have been marked by unequal playing fields, the exclusion of marginalized groups, weakened EMBs, and voting and result-counting irregularities. These issues erode the power of elections to fulfil their primary role as a check on unpopular governments that are not responsive to their people's needs. Such problems are compounded by weak parliaments that struggle to contain executive overreach and are therefore unable to effectively halt actions that dismantle democratic systems. Over the last five years, GSoD data have revealed declines in Representation in every region. Figure 1.7 shows related declines between 2021 and 2022.

Strong and publicly legitimate electoral processes do remain, however. In 2022, two European countries moved into the list of top 20 performers in Representation: Switzerland and Czechia (Figure 1.8).

Malaysia (ranked at 92), Latvia (44) and Kenya (89) experienced the largest upward movements in the Representation rankings, with Malaysia now in the

Figure 1.7. Countries with the biggest declines in the rankings for Representation (year on year, 2021 to 2022)

Ranking -	157	88	113	22	13	72	95	78	63	9	136	106	96	82	66	81	64	58	51	47	41	19	
Change -	-64	-23	-18	-13	-11	-7	-6	-5	-5	-5	-4	-4	-4	-4	-4	-3	-3	-3	-3	-3	-3	-3	-3
	Burkina Faso	Tunisia	Guinea-Bissau	Portugal	Costa Rica	Mauritius	El Salvador	Solomon Islands	Mongolia	Uruguay	Russia	Iraq	Guatemala	Sierra Leone	India	Botswana	Namibia	Poland	Vanuatu	Barbados	Argentina	United Kingdom	

Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

Figure 1.8. Top 20 countries in the rankings for Representation in 2022

Change -	0	1	3	0	5	1	4	0	-5	3	5	0	-11	3	-1	2	1	3	-3	1	2
Ranking -	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	10	12	13	14	15	16	17	17	19	20	20
	Sweden	Denmark	Estonia	Chile	Netherlands	Germany	Norway	Finland	Uruguay	France	Spain	New Zealand	Costa Rica	Italy	Belgium	Australia	Greece	Taiwan	United Kingdom	Czechia	Switzerland

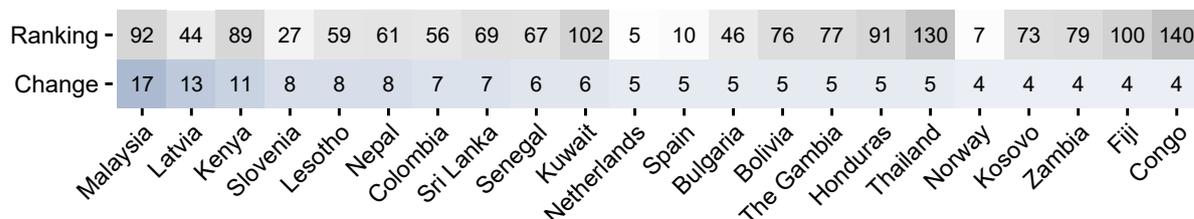
Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

top 100 and Latvia newly in the top 50. Figures 1.7 and 1.9 show countries that experienced the largest changes in Representation over the past year.

1.2.1. Declines and advances in Credible Elections

A diverse list of countries have been affected by declines, with the following five experiencing the largest falls in the Representation rankings over the past year: Burkina Faso (ranked at 157), Tunisia (88), Guinea-Bissau (113), Portugal (22) and Costa Rica (13). In Portugal, the late adoption of changes to the electoral law in 2021 and 2022 contributed to the deterioration of scores (Luís 2023; OSCE/ODIHR 2022). Portugal lost its position among the world's top 10 in Representation (although it remains a high-performing country). In Costa Rica, which is also a high-performing country, analysts noted attacks on the

Figure 1.9. Countries with the biggest improvements in the rankings for Representation (year on year, 2021 to 2022)



Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

media and limited access to information in the context of the 2022 election (Álvarez 2023). Allegations of illegal election financing by President Rodrigo Chaves' campaign have led to an investigation by the country's Congress (Reuters 2022).

In other countries, declines were due to more extreme circumstances. Two successful coups and an additional coup attempt in 2022 precipitated Burkina Faso's steep slide in rankings (AfricaNews and AFP 2023). Similarly, the recent coups in Niger and Gabon will significantly lower their Representation scores in the next round of data.

There have also been worrying problems in countries that are ranked in the mid-range in Representation. Guinea-Bissau (113), Mauritius (72) and Tunisia (88) are among the mid-range performers that saw the greatest fall in ranking, but many others also experienced significant declines. In Tunisia, the 2022 parliamentary elections followed significant changes in the electoral system. The polls were characterized by bans on political parties, which were not permitted to field or fund candidates. Multiple opposition parties boycotted the election, and turnout in the first round was 11 per cent, the second-lowest in the world since 1945 (Grewal 2022; International IDEA n.d.; Al-Ali 2022). In a context marked by a lack of meaningful competition and without the participation of the majority of the country's voters, the Tunisian election could not reflect people's assessments of governmental performance. The 2024 elections, however, offer an opportunity for the return to some level of democratic equilibrium.

Mauritius also experienced declines over this period, especially in Credible Elections and Effective Parliament, with the decrease in the latter particularly large. Some of this decline can be traced to the 2019 elections, which some analysts have characterized as a turning point for the country, due to problems

Box 1.1. Mauritius

Mauritius has for several decades been regarded as one of Africa's best-managed democracies and the country remains one of the continent's top performers when measured by the average score across all GSoD factors. It is a mid-range performer in three out of the four categories (Rights, Rule of Law and Representation) and a high performer in Participation, thanks to its strong performance in the factor Civic Engagement.

A comparison of GSoD data from 2017 and 2022, however, reveals a sharp decline in Mauritius' average factor score and significant declines in six factors, including Civil Liberties, Effective Parliament and

Credible Elections. Critics trace these trends to the country's 2019 general elections, which they allege to have been problematic and to have ushered in broader anti-democratic developments, including government restriction and harassment of opposition political parties and NGOs (Pilling 2022; Darga and Peeraullee 2021).

According to Afrobarometer's perception data, Mauritians' support for democracy, while in decline, remains strong and the general elections scheduled for 2024 present an opportunity to bolster that faith and to renew its democracy (Afrobarometer 2023; Stuurman and Peeraullee 2021).

at and beyond the polling station (Darga and Peeraullee 2021). It is important to note, however, that the 2019 elections represent an outlier in a long history of credible democratic elections in Mauritius and the country remains mid-range performing in Representation. The 2019 elections also sparked an interest in electoral reforms and there is at least one reform bill under consideration, although approval remains controversial (Mauritius National Assembly). Given that people's confidence in democratic institutions and support for democracy remains strong, the 2024 elections offer an opportunity for a rebound (Stuurman and Peeraullee 2021; Afrobarometer 2023;).

At the same time, though, there have been inspiring elections around the world. Most of these have been marked by important party turnover and improvements to the electoral atmosphere. Mid-performing Malaysia (92) and high-performing Latvia (44) climbed the most in the rankings for Representation, moving upwards by 17 and 13 places, respectively. In Malaysia, the dominant party did poorly, signalling the electorate's frustration with years of corruption and demonstrating the power of the polls in checking an unresponsive government (Kurlantzick 2022). In Latvia, the 2022 parliamentary elections followed improvements to the electoral law, including the introduction of electronic, online voting registration (OSCE/ODIHR 2023).

1.2.2. Declines and advances in Effective Parliament

Beyond elections, representative democracy also depends in fundamental ways on legislatures. They are, in many contexts, the first line of defence against executive overreach. It is here where elected political parties and representatives can, if the need arises, investigate and sanction the executive branch. The legislative branch is also where elected representatives work to reflect people's needs in laws and system design.

Over the last five years, a number of parliaments have struggled to exercise their oversight functions, and significant declines have been seen in Effective Parliament in countries across the political spectrum. Among those that experienced the largest declines in ranking, three countries were marked

by coups or coup attempts and other suspensions of political institutions (low-performing Burkina Faso and Guinea-Bissau, and mid-range performing Tunisia).

These were the extremes but, elsewhere, some countries that are high-performing (such as Japan and Slovenia) and mid-range performing (such as Argentina, Greece, Iraq, Nepal and Nigeria) have also seen declines over the last five years. In Nigeria, for example, the legislature has struggled with capacity and political will (Staddon 2017). It has also been challenged in exercising executive oversight, demonstrating its secondary status through actions such as granting loans to administrations without following the regulations for doing so (Premium Times Nigeria 2023).

In contrast, the European region leads in hopeful bright spots, home to 5 of the 12 countries that have experienced advances in Effective Parliament over the last five years. High-performing Bulgaria, Czechia and Slovakia and mid-range performing Armenia and Moldova have all seen improvements. In Armenia, for example, parliament's questioning of the prime minister over the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020 was a sign that initial gains may be continuing, although it is unclear if it will become a long-term trend (JAM News 2023).

1.3. RIGHTS

In the GSoD Indices, Rights is an aggregate measure of a fair legal system, respect for civil liberties, the extent to which the material and social supports of democracy are available, and the degree to which political and social equality between social groups and genders is realized.

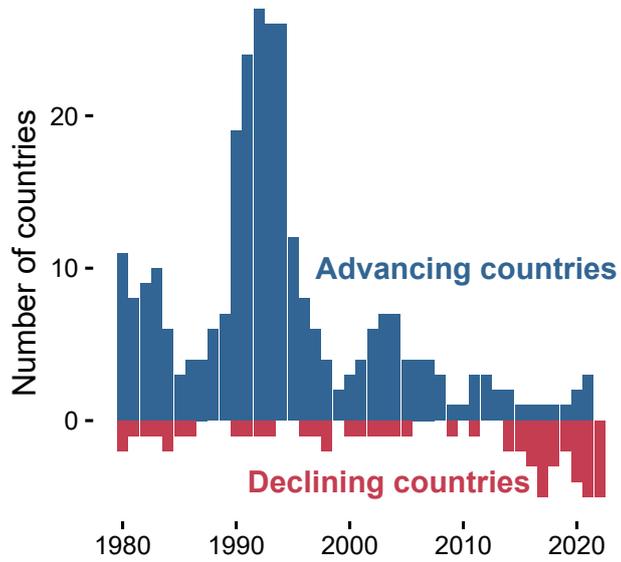
Public control over decision making is meaningless without equality in the exercise of that control. As the world prepares to mark the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the overall pattern of decline in the GSoD Indices' measures of respect for human rights is a stark reminder of how vulnerable democracies can be (Figure 1.10). In 2022, there were no countries showing significant improvement in the protection and exercise of rights, as demonstrated by no single country experiencing an advance in the Rights category when compared with its own performance in 2017.

Instead, declines have become the norm. While some deterioration was due to extreme circumstances, such as coups and state collapse, drops in the Rights rankings also occurred for less severe reasons. Figure 1.11 lists the countries with the largest negative movements.

There was little movement within the top 20 performers in Rights over the past year. Czechia is newly in the top 10, having moved one place up, and Lithuania is newly in the top 20, having moved up 5 positions in the ranking. Other notable improvements were seen for Vanuatu, now in the top 50 (ranked at 43), and Slovenia (24). Figures 1.12 and 1.13 show the list of the top 20 performers

Rights is an aggregate measure of a fair legal system, respect for civil liberties, the extent to which the material and social supports of democracy are available, and the degree to which political and social equality between social groups and genders is realized.

Figure 1.10. Countries with declines in Rights outnumber those with advances (graph shows the number of countries advancing or declining in Rights, 1980–2022)



Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

Figure 1.11. Countries with the biggest declines in the rankings for Rights (year on year, 2021 to 2022)

Ranking -	88	100	57	160	64	63	137	120	84	133	51	110	114	37	149	33	173	122	115	98
Change -	-18	-13	-13	-12	-12	-12	-11	-11	-11	-9	-9	-8	-7	-7	-6	-6	-5	-5	-5	-5
	Sri Lanka	Jordan	Suriname	Haiti	Botswana	Bhutan	El Salvador	Mali	Brazil	Russia	Romania	Ethiopia	Mexico	Israel	Mauritania	Slovakia	Afghanistan	Kyrgyzstan	Algeria	Maldives

Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

Figure 1.12. Top 20 places in the ranking for Rights in 2022

Change -	0	0	0	2	2	-2	-2	1	0	1	-1	0	3	0	-2	1	-2	0	0	0	5
Ranking -	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	7	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	20
	Denmark	Germany	Switzerland	Belgium	Norway	Luxembourg	Finland	Sweden	Australia	Czechia	Iceland	Ireland	New Zealand	Italy	Spain	Japan	Netherlands	Estonia	Latvia	Costa Rica	Lithuania

Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

Figure 1.13. Countries with the biggest improvements in the rankings for Rights (year on year, 2021 to 2022)

Ranking -	43	24	103	106	146	76	32	52	60	75	91	59	94	128	20	29	125	126
Change -	14	12	12	9	9	8	7	7	7	7	7	6	6	6	5	5	5	5
	Vanuatu	Slovenia	Honduras	Zambia	Laos	Tanzania	Chile	Armenia	The Gambia	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Colombia	Panama	Indonesia	Djibouti	Lithuania	Malta	Qatar	Vietnam

Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

and the list of the countries that experienced the greatest improvements over the past year.

1.3.1. Declines in Civil Liberties

Civil liberties, which shape people's daily experiences of public life, are at the heart of democracy. These human rights grease the gears of democratic systems by empowering people to act as the ultimate check on power. Civil liberties equip people to find the information they need to evaluate their governments, to voice their views and to pursue the kinds of lives they wish to lead.

Over the last five years, global average performance in Civil Liberties has remained stable in the mid-range, but notable declines in Freedom of Expression, Freedom of Association and Assembly, and Freedom of the Press have affected every region of the world. Access to Justice has also been similarly impacted.

Examples include media restrictions in many different countries across the world, even those showing high performance overall. Two examples of countries that are mid-range performing in Freedom of the Press are: Bangladesh, where authorities arrested relatives of expatriate journalists who were critical of the government; and South Korea, which has been criticized for inhibiting access to outlets seen to be critical of the president ([RSF 2022](#); [CIVICUS 2022c](#)).

The Philippines, which is also mid-range performing in Freedom of the Press and Freedom of Expression, continues to struggle. Despite recent court victories for Nobel laureate and Rappler CEO Maria Ressa, the independent digital media company is still fighting an order that seeks to shut it down ([ICJ 2022](#)). This occurs in a broader context of repression, recently marked by the murder of veteran journalist Percy Lapid, known for his outspoken criticism of human rights abuses and corruption, and ongoing violations of press freedom ([Palatino 2022](#); [NUJP 2022](#)).

There were 187 Internet shutdowns in 35 countries in 2022, with India topping the list for the fifth consecutive year ([Access Now 2023](#)). Mid-range performing India's declines in Freedom of Expression and Freedom of Association and Assembly go beyond Internet shutdowns, exemplified by the government's restriction of free expression and peaceful assembly in Jammu and Kashmir ([International IDEA 2023](#); [Raj 2022](#)). The government has arbitrarily detained journalists there and barred a Pulitzer prize-winning journalist from leaving the country to receive her prize; the journalist was not given a reason for the government's action ([CPJ 2022](#); [Hassan 2022](#)).

In the Americas, experts describe countries such as mid-range performing (in Freedom of the Press) Ecuador, Haiti and Mexico as among the world's most dangerous for journalists ([RSF 2023](#)). More than half of all the murders of journalists in the world occurred in three countries, two of them in Latin America and the Caribbean (Haiti and Mexico, and Ukraine). Mexico stood out for being the site of 13 murders of journalists in 2022, the highest ever in a single year ([Dunham 2023](#)).

Surveillance scandals targeting media and opposition politicians across Europe—in countries that are both mid-range performing (Hungary and Poland) and high-performing (Spain and Greece) in the Civil Liberties factor—sparked a European Parliament recommendation to temporarily ban the sale, acquisition and use of spyware until certain conditions have been met ([Killeen 2023](#)). In Greece, the Hellenic Authority for Communication Security and Privacy has acted as an important CI, helping to uncover what happened and leading investigations into the surveillance scandal ([Stamouli 2023](#)). These issues are

reflected in the GSoD rankings for Rights. In 2022, South Korea (ranked at 35) remained in the top 50 but fell three places, while India (104) also dropped by three spots. In 2022, the largest falls were in Sri Lanka (88), Suriname (57), Jordan (100), Haiti (160), Botswana (64), Bhutan (63), Mali (120), El Salvador (137) and Brazil (84). Romania (51) and Suriname (57) fell out of the top 50 ranking in Rights between 2021 and 2022.

1.3.2. Advances in Civil Liberties and Social Group Equality

At the same time, there have been some encouraging developments. Vanuatu (ranked at 43), Slovenia (24) and Honduras (103) experienced the largest increases in ranking in Rights between 2021 and 2022. In Slovenia, the public voted in reforms to strengthen the country's independent broadcaster, a victory made possible by protests and strikes by journalists, some of which were supported by the public (CIVICUS 2022b; International IDEA 2022).

There were several instances in which rights related to gender and sexuality were expanded in countries that perform at varying levels in Social Group Equality around the world. In 2022, some highlights include the decriminalization of gay sex in mid-range performing Singapore (although full marriage equality remains blocked), and in three Caribbean countries (Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, and Saint Kitts and Nevis). Mid-range performing Mexico legalized same-sex marriage; mid-range performing India approved equal abortion access; easier access to abortion care was enabled in high-performing Finland; and sweeping gender equality reforms took place in mid-range performing Spain (AFP 2022; CIVICUS 2022d; AP 2022; Rajagopal 2022; Finnish Government 2022; OHCHR 2023).

CI, such as parliaments and courts, have played critical roles in these cases, passing and enforcing laws that expand rights for everyone. They were helped by the efforts of civil society groups, who have utilized public events and public interest litigation to mobilize support and enforce respect for equal rights (CIVICUS 2022d).

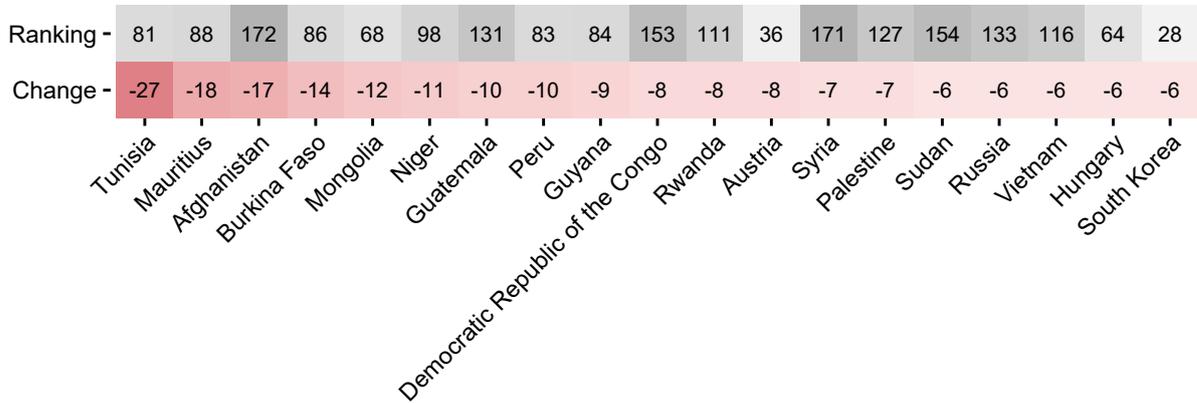
1.4. RULE OF LAW

In the GSoD Indices, Rule of Law is a new aggregate measure introduced this year (with comparisons from 2021). It includes assessments of the independence of the judiciary from government influence, the extent to which the public administrators use their offices for personal gain, how predictable enforcement of the law is, and the degree to which people are free from political violence.

In 2022, at the global level, Rule of Law saw performance in the mid-range, but all regions of the world have experienced significant declines over the last five years. Although European countries dominate the top of the Rule of Law rankings (Figure 1.15), it is important to note relative declines. Europe is the region with the highest number of countries seeing a significant downward

Rule of Law includes assessments of the independence of the judiciary, the extent to which the public administrators use their offices for personal gain, how predictable enforcement of the law is, and the degree to which people are free from political violence.

Figure 1.14. Countries with the biggest declines in the rankings for Rule of Law (year on year, 2021 to 2022)



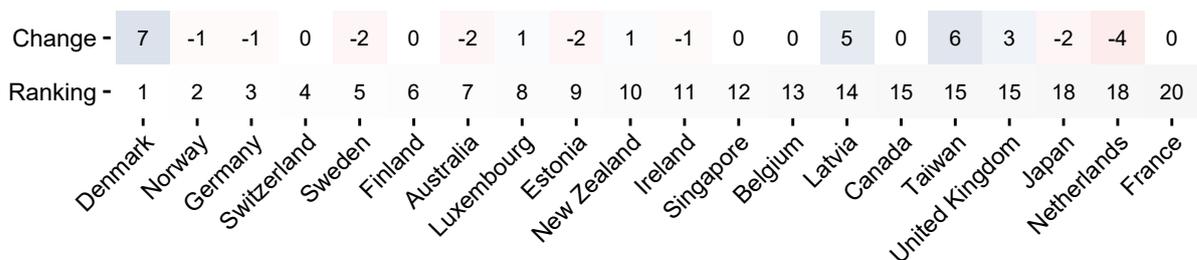
Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

shift in performance. Austria and Hungary were among the countries that experienced the greatest declines in ranking over the past year (Figure 1.14).

Overall in the rankings, the most dramatic falls took place in Tunisia (ranked at 81 after a fall of 27 places), Mauritius (88) and Afghanistan (172).

On a more positive note, notable upward movements were seen in Zambia (ranked at 78 after a rise of 21 points), Colombia (73) and Moldova (56). Taiwan (15) moved up six places to reach the top 20 in Rule of Law, and

Figure 1.15. Top 20 countries in the rankings for Rule of Law in 2022



Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

Figure 1.16. Countries with the biggest improvements in the rankings for Rule of Law (year on year, 2021 to 2022)

Ranking -	78	73	56	65	101	23	30	70	40	71	77	1	48	107	121	135	15	76	95	144
Change -	21	20	15	14	14	11	11	9	8	8	8	7	7	7	7	7	6	6	6	6
	Zambia	Colombia	Moldova	Kuwait	Honduras	Czechia	Slovenia	Suriname	Trinidad and Tobago	Malaysia	Albania	Denmark	Bulgaria	Mozambique	Pakistan	Bangladesh	Taiwan	Oman	Sri Lanka	Azerbaijan

Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

Denmark moved up seven places to be ranked first in this category in 2022. Figures 1.15 and 1.16 show these patterns.

1.4.1. Declines in Judicial Independence

Powerful political and economic interests weight the scales in ways that make it difficult for people to be treated equally before the law and for courts to act as meaningful checks on excessive government power. This is compounded by public administrators who use their offices for personal gain, further tilting the balance of power away from the people. GSoD Indices' data show notable declines in Judicial Independence in every region of the world, affecting a wide and diverse array of countries, including even high performers (Canada) and mid-range performers (Benin, Greece, Guatemala, Guinea-Bissau, Mauritius, Palestine, Poland and Tunisia) (Figure 1.17).

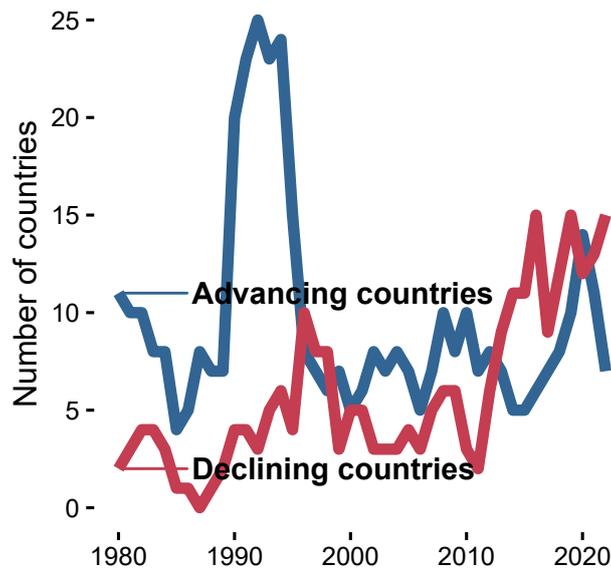
In Poland, new laws that have increased the government's role in the nomination of judges for the country's courts sparked widespread criticism and a serious disagreement with the European Union. In what appears to be a continuing trend, three senior judges on the Supreme Court resigned in protest in May 2023 (Łukaszewicz 2023).

Greek declines have been partially attributed to concerns that the country's Prosecutor of the Supreme Court attempted to block an audit related to a spyware scandal (Michalopoulos 2023).

The former United Nations Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers expressed grave concerns about how reforms enabled the Tunisian president to interfere with the appointment, promotion and discipline of judges (OHCHR 2022).

A lack of judicial independence can result in unpredictable enforcement of the law, creating instability and uncertainty. Over the last five years, there

Figure 1.17. Countries with declines in Judicial Independence outnumber those with advances, although there have been many improvements since 2018 (graph shows the number of countries advancing or declining in Judicial Independence, 1980–2022)



Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

have been significant falls in predictable enforcement of the law in nearly all regions of the world. Europe has seen the largest number of such declines, with affected countries including the high-performing Netherlands and United Kingdom, and mid-range performing Austria, Hungary and Portugal. Low-performing Belarus has also continued to decline.

The Group of States against Corruption (GRECO), in its latest report on Austria, raised concerns about oversight of the activities of ministers and state secretaries outside of government. GRECO advised that significant strengthening of the supervisory, advisory and enforcement systems of the laws on this issue was required (GRECO 2023).

Partly as a result of a childcare benefits scandal in the Netherlands, in which the Dutch Tax and Customs Administration used discriminatory algorithms to falsely accuse thousands of parents of fraud in their applications for benefits, the government began considering reforms that would allow courts to rule on the constitutionality of laws passed by parliament (Dutch News 2022). In both the Austrian and Dutch cases, expert recommendations have focused on the need to build up formal CIs, which include required action by the legislature and the courts.

1.4.2. Limited success in the fight against corruption

While there is no significant change in the aggregated scores for Absence of Corruption at the global or regional levels, there have been cases of improvement at the country level in all regions. Most of the changes have been driven by improvements in the assessment of executive bribery and embezzlement, public sector theft and corrupt exchanges within the public sector.

Africa leads, with the largest number of country-level advances, followed closely by Asia and the Pacific, and Europe. In Zambia, which experienced the most dramatic positive shift in the Rule of Law rankings (reaching 78 after an increase of 21 places), notable milestones include the government's cancellation of suspicious public contracts and increased anti-corruption investigations (Gonzales 2022; IMF 2023; Short 2023). Moldova (56) also moved up in the Rule of Law rankings, partly as a result of its anti-corruption efforts, which include a new court focused specifically on this issue (OSCE PA 2022; Moldpres 2023). Many of these advances have been due to political will in the executive and in the legislature, demonstrating how these fundamental CIs can act together to create change.

Independent oversight CIs have also been powerful in the fight against corruption. Malaysia stands out for the work of its vigilant anti-corruption commission, while progress in Romania is due in part to a new national anti-corruption strategy and investigations of high-level corruption, and in the Dominican Republic to the strength of its anti-corruption agencies (Strangio 2023; European Commission 2022; Dominican Today 2022).

These limited gains do not diminish the continuing challenges involved in combating the significant, global scourge of corruption, nor are they a promise of a more systematic and long-term trend of improvements. In many cases, positive change was observed in countries where the overall level of corruption continued to be high, compared with other countries that show high performance in Absence of Corruption. Gains in this area must be understood as limited, initial signals of positive change that will need substantial support to maintain. In some cases, they do point to an opportunity to identify and act on new lessons learned.

1.4.3. Declines and advances in Personal Integrity and Security

People's experiences of democracy are also affected by their basic security and whether they can safely go about their daily lives. This is a concern around the world, but the regions with the greatest number of countries showing declines over the last five years are the Americas, Africa and Europe.

In the Americas, a varied mix of countries—including low-performing Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela, as well as mid-range performing Brazil and high-performing Uruguay—have experienced notable falls in measures of personal security. Across the region, the last five years have witnessed increasing rates of crime and violence, prompting some leaders to use the military to try and quell the insecurity. This pattern has been observed in mid-performing countries

as diverse as Chile, Ecuador, El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico and Peru. Given the history of military involvement in the region's politics, this trend is worrying.

Another concern in the Americas region relates to the significant rise in gun violence in the United States, where there were 646 mass shootings in 2022. This number is 86 per cent more than five years ago, in 2017, when the number was 348 (GVA 2023).

In some places, of course, security and safety have improved. Angola's improvements have allowed it to move from low to mid-range performing in the last five years, and increases in Maldives and The Gambia have also been significant.

Participation is an aggregate measure of how involved citizens are in democratic expression during and between elections.

1.5. PARTICIPATION

In the GSoD Indices, Participation is an aggregate measure of how involved citizens are in democratic expression during and between elections. It includes assessments of the context within which civil society operates, the strength of interest groups, the degree to which people are engaged with associations and trade unions, and voter turnout in national elections.

The hope for the future of democracy remains firmly in the realm of public participation, and the GSoD rankings for Participation bring some major positives in this area. The rankings are striking for their dynamism and diversity. While global trends do not show large shifts, some of the notable country-level developments could indicate a more long-term upward movement in this category overall.

Unlike in other categories, many countries have experienced relatively large shifts in position in the rankings for Participation over the past year (see

Figure 1.18. Top 20 countries in the rankings for Participation in 2022

Change -	0	0	0	3	-1	-1	2	3	-1	3	1	-2	-7	-1	4	4	4	4	10	-5
Ranking -	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
	Denmark	Finland	Ireland	Taiwan	Norway	Switzerland	Iceland	Uruguay	Italy	Germany	Belgium	United States	Sweden	Luxembourg	Costa Rica	Austria	Canada	Argentina	Mauritius	Sierra Leone

Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

Figure 1.19. Countries with biggest declines in the rankings for Participation (year on year, 2021 to 2022)

Ranking -	95	43	58	53	115	111	82	119	120	169	102	157	67	87	80	79	58	90	47
Change -	-35	-28	-26	-22	-20	-19	-18	-16	-15	-13	-13	-12	-12	-11	-11	-11	-11	-10	-10
	Tunisia	Burkina Faso	Malawi	Botswana	Romania	Democratic Republic of the Congo	Bulgaria	Jordan	Mauritania	Afghanistan	Zimbabwe	Myanmar	Montenegro	North Macedonia	Guinea-Bissau	Lesotho	Malta	Nigeria	Slovakia

Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

Figures 1.19 and 1.20). Zambia (ranked at 46) and Kenya (39) experienced the biggest jumps, moving up 40 and 24 places, respectively. Tunisia (jointly ranked with Serbia at 95), Burkina Faso (43) and Malawi (58) experienced the largest falls in ranking over the past year, sliding down 35, 28 and 26 places, respectively. Moreover, the list of the top 20 countries in the world is the most diverse of all categories, as it includes two African countries—Mauritius (19) and Sierra Leone (20)—in 2022. Figures 1.18, 1.19 and 1.20 show these patterns.

Figure 1.20. Countries with the biggest improvements in the rankings for Participation (year on year, 2021 to 2022)

Ranking -	46	39	85	98	34	87	73	78	100	31	77	19	30	60	101	110	127	131
Change -	40	24	17	16	14	14	13	12	12	11	11	10	10	10	10	10	10	10
	Zambia	Kenya	Colombia	Kosovo	Slovenia	Timor-Leste	Ukraine	Sri Lanka	Cameroon	Dominican Republic	Côte d'Ivoire	Mauritius	Mali	Jamaica	Ethiopia	Kuwait	Libya	Angola

Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

1.5.1. Advances in Civil Society and Civic Engagement

Organs that facilitate public participation are key to thriving democracies, because they enable people to take ownership of the institutions that shape their political and social lives, and ensure that community-level priorities are channelled upwards to various government bodies. In many cases, people self-organize, taking to the streets, developing petitions or meeting in local spaces to voice their concerns and seek responses from their governments. The data show that it is not uncommon for participation to persist even in settings that are challenged in multiple and serious ways.

In Zambia, civil society helped to establish a public register of mining interests, which strengthens accountability by disclosing who stands to benefit from owning corporate assets. In the long run, such systems can help stem corruption and illicit financing, among other things ([Open Ownership 2021](#); [Tonn 2023](#)). At the same time, it is important to remember that such progress takes place in a context that many have described as a stalled transition, marked by the continuation of serious human rights violations in spite of the new government's promises to the contrary ([Amnesty International 2021](#); [HRW 2023](#)).

In Kenya, the 2022 election demonstrated the impact of decades' worth of civil society efforts to institutionalize important reforms, particularly through public interest litigation that has focused on bringing electoral laws in line with the Constitution ([Nantulya 2022](#)).

In 2023, there were some powerful and significant examples of popular participation across the globe. They include:

- the Thai opposition's popular mobilization and resulting electoral victory;
- resistance committees in Sudan;
- protests against proposed changes to the judiciary in Israel;
- public demonstrations against the Mexican Government's proposals to change the electoral law and weaken the EMB;
- Indian protests against a court decision that could expand who is considered part of a 'scheduled tribe' (which tend to be among the most socio-economically disadvantaged groups of people); and
- protests in Greece against perceived underinvestment in the railway network (after a fatal train crash).

Certainly, the existence of protest alone is not enough to protect or strengthen democracy. This is especially the case when public demonstrations include violence (whether perpetrated by the authorities or protesters), as the focus can easily shift from the issue at the root of the protests to the violence itself.

The 2022 data also revealed interesting changes in mid-range performing countries that do not normally receive attention for improving levels of public participation. Two countries showed advances in measures of public engagement with political and non-political associations and trade unions: Papua New Guinea and The Gambia. Also, six countries in Africa, the Americas,

and Asia and the Pacific showed improvements in measures of a supportive environment for civil society organizations (CSOs): the high-performing Dominican Republic, mid-performing Ethiopia, Fiji, Maldives and Zambia, as well as low-performing Sudan.³

Notably, some of these countries have also shown broader gains that go beyond the space for CSOs to include people's rights to voice opinions and organize. Compared with five years ago, four countries have experienced advances in both the Civil Society and the Freedom of Association and Assembly factors. These are: Ethiopia, Maldives, Zambia and low-performing Sudan. Two of these—Ethiopia and Maldives—have seen significant advances in another related factor, Freedom of Expression, as well. Such advances suggest an important opening up of opportunities and support for public participation.

In Ethiopia, gains were due in part to rules that allowed civil society groups to form and serve their communities more easily, and to the removal of a restriction on foreign funding (UNESCO 2020). These advances occurred, however, during conflict that has had a negative impact on civic space, including new regulations that permitted the government to monitor civil society 'in any way' it deemed appropriate (Tsegaye 2021). As these examples show, the gains are important but they take place in what continues to be a challenging environment for civic activity overall.

1.5.2. Declines in Civil Society and Civic Engagement

Countries where there have been noteworthy deteriorations in the environment for civil society to operate include five low performers (Afghanistan, El Salvador, Guatemala, Myanmar and Nicaragua) and three mid-range performers (Benin, Sri Lanka and Tunisia).

In Benin, civil society groups' submission to the UN's Universal Periodic Review⁴ described how the country's Digital Code, introduced to regulate digital activities, has been used to target civil society, journalists and human rights defenders, resulting in an environment of fear over speaking out. The submission also raised concerns about discriminatory provisions for 'foreign associations' and the duration of registration processes for civil society (CIVICUS et al. 2022).

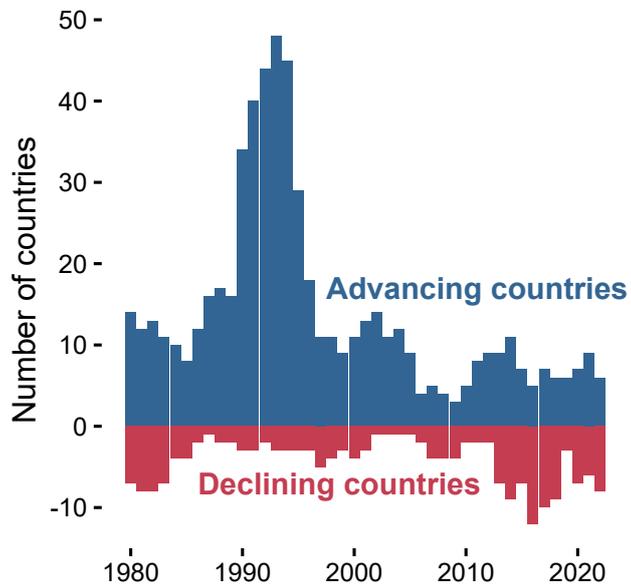
Civic space for participation has also contracted in El Salvador, where a 'state of exception' has restricted people's freedom of expression, and freedom of assembly and association, and has exposed civil society to increased risk of attacks (CIVICUS 2022a).

The overall global picture of significant positive and negative shifts is shown in Figure 1.21.

³ The most recent dataset does not include developments related to the 2023 outbreak of violence in Sudan.

⁴ A mechanism of the Human Rights Council that calls for each UN member state to undergo a peer review of its human rights records every 4.5 years.

Figure 1.21. There has been a great deal of variation in patterns with regard to Civil Society (graph shows countries advancing or declining, 1980–2022)



Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

Overall, the resilience of Civic Engagement and people’s continuing commitment to making their voices heard, even as the space for doing so becomes narrower, is a testament to democracy’s unique capacity to enable change.

In many cases, however, gains have been made in contexts that are sharply challenging overall, illustrating the importance of continued support to democratic institutions, even where some successes are apparent. Moreover, people’s continuing commitment to engagement does not reduce the threat posed by leaders’ ongoing efforts to limit dissent and silence criticism.

Support for civil society groups is critical. Equally important is concerted pressure on governments to ensure that they fully respect freedom of expression, and freedom of association and assembly. These rights underpin everyone’s ability to participate. Much will depend on how people and groups are able to withstand government pressure and even threats, but democracy’s shape-shifting gifts will reinforce its relevance and efficacy in the years ahead.

Chapter 2

AFRICA

Key findings

- There were diverse democratic trends across the continent, but the continuing wave of coups d'état, as well as civil conflict in Ethiopia and Sudan, has highlighted the challenges to democratic consolidation. The quality of Representation in many countries has been negatively affected by unconstitutional changes of government, the evasion of term limits for heads of state, and declines in Credible Elections.
- Even so, countries noted for their recent progress (such as The Gambia and Zambia) remain on a positive course, particularly through improvements in election administration, participation and the expansion of civic space.
- Participation is an area of regional strength. Nine African countries are in the top 50 in the world in levels of Participation. Recent experiences in Ghana, Kenya, Morocco, Mozambique, Nigeria and Sierra Leone (among other countries) have shown that popular movements can play a vital role as a countervailing institution when other institutions have been unable to constrain governments. However, the frequency of violence associated with such protests suggests that this should be a countervailing institution of last resort.
- Formal countervailing institutions have a mixed record. Co-opted and weak legislatures have contrasted with judiciaries and fourth-branch institutions that have demonstrated they can be effective checks on executive power.
- The African Union and the Regional Economic Communities have an important role to play in establishing and upholding democratic norms in Africa. However, inadequate compliance by member states (including on matters as serious as reinstating a head of state, or making a swift transition back to civilian rule) has shown that there is no substitute for effective democratic institutions at the domestic level.

The average level of democracy at the continental level in Africa remains relatively stable.

2.1. INTRODUCTION

Africa is home to a range of democratic experiences, and the average level of democracy at the continental level remains relatively stable, despite advances and (more often) declines in particular countries. The one exception to this broad stability is in Representation, where there has been a decline in the continental average over the last five years (Figure 2.1). Given Africa's size, such a decline is a sign of serious problems, as detailed below. It highlights two pressing challenges for democratic consolidation: failures in election administration and declining trust in institutions (Mbaegu 2023; Bloh 2023). Meanwhile, Participation (including Electoral Participation and Civil Society) stands out as a bright spot, as many countries have maintained the progress made in the 1990s (Figure 2.2).

This contrast between trust and participation leads to a broader argument about democracy in Africa: people care about democracy, and they are willing to mobilize to support it. However, this support is not unconditional. Critical material issues (often in terms of the fulfilment of basic needs) have pushed people to reconsider their support for the institutions that supposedly represent them, yet it is in the interest of incumbent governments to focus on service delivery rather than on any of the larger institutional problems that are often at the root of broader deficiencies. Nevertheless, in the face of mounting debt, economic and fiscal crises, and broadening austerity measures, this link between citizens' unmet welfare needs and the failure of purportedly democratic governments to develop economic opportunities (particularly for youth) could challenge the legitimacy of politicians and institutions (*The Economist* 2023; Bagnetto 2023).

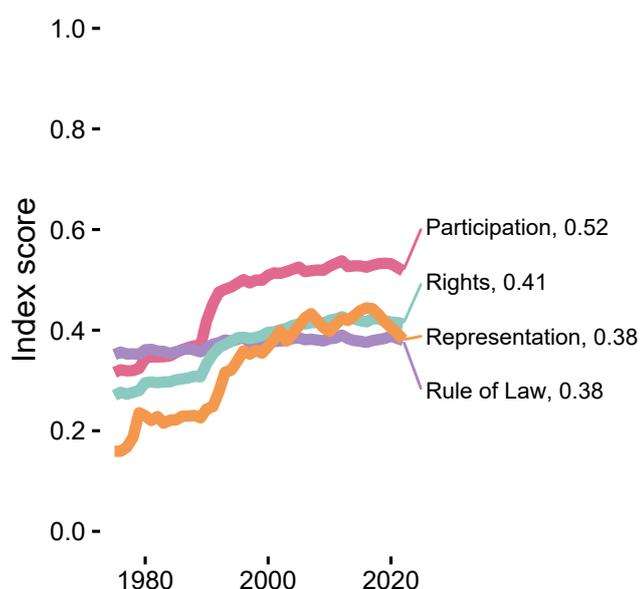
Finally, conflict and insecurity continue to threaten democracy and human rights. Increasing levels of violence in Burkina Faso, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali, Mozambique, Niger and Sudan are particularly notable (see also the case study on Sudan). Africa also remains a field of geopolitical competition as foreign powers—such as China, France, Russia, the UK and the USA—seek to maintain spheres of influence and to pursue their own economic and security interests. It will not be possible to secure a democratic future without addressing insecurity and governance deficits in their many manifestations.

2.2. THE STATE OF DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA

2.2.1. Representation

Representation is currently an area of weakness across the continent. Only two African countries rank in the top 50 for Representation in the world: Cabo Verde (see also the case study) and Ghana. South Africa follows these countries in 54th place. The African countries with the biggest falls in ranking between 2021 and 2022 were Burkina Faso, Tunisia and Guinea-Bissau. Kenya showed the most notable improvement in the rankings.

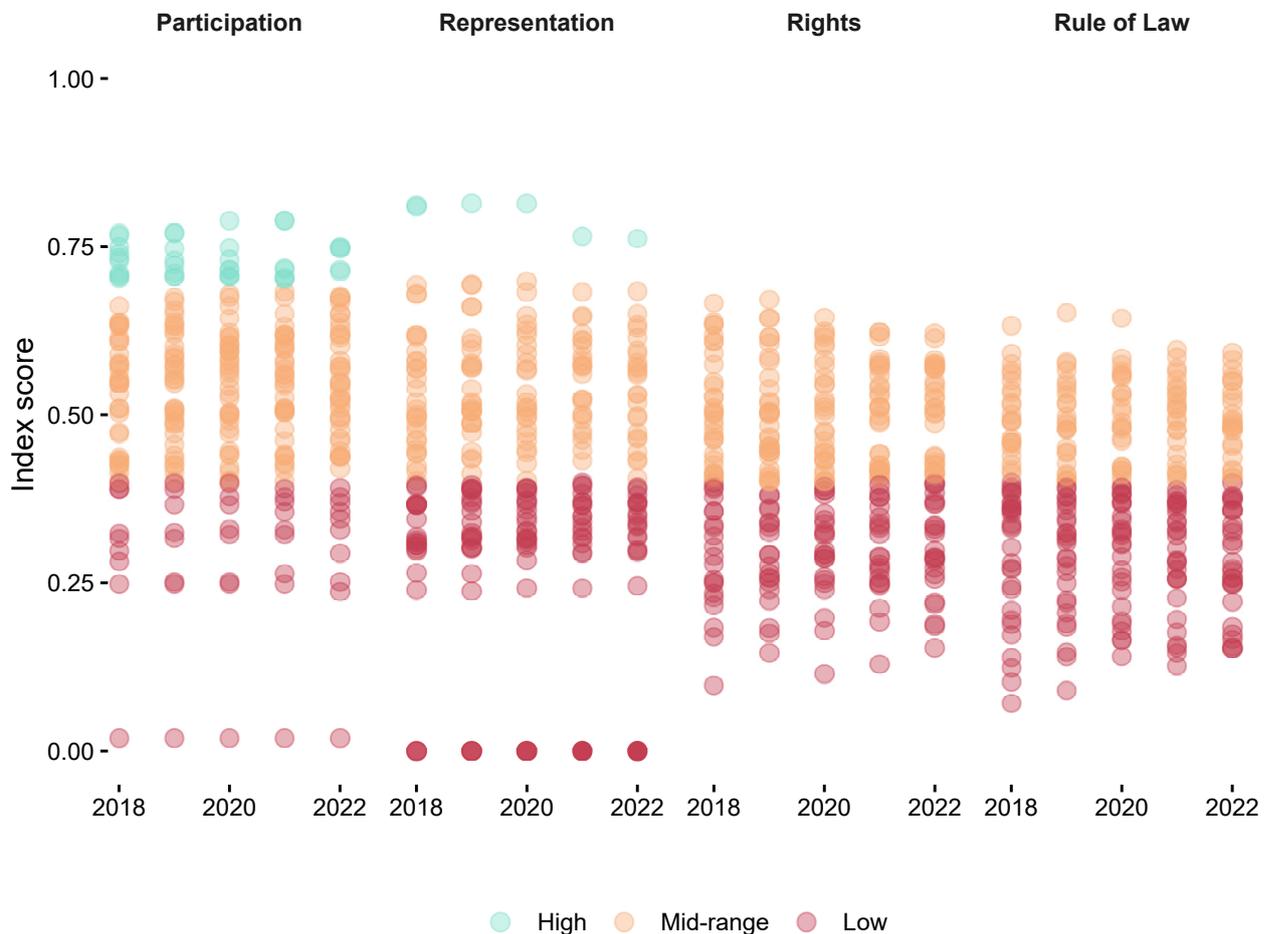
Figure 2.1. Among the categories of democratic performance, Africa performs well in Participation but has suffered declines in Representation (graph shows trends in categories of democratic performance in Africa, 1975–2022)



Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

These declines in Representation at the national level have, for the most part, followed one of two major patterns. First, several countries have experienced coups d'état, unconstitutional changes of government and other 'undefined transitions', whose outcomes remain uncertain. Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali and Sudan stand out in this regard, and their Representation scores have all dropped to zero. The wave of coups continued in 2023 (not yet reflected in the GSoD Indices) with the overthrowing of the governments in Niger and Gabon. In the second pattern, broader democratic declines have been seen in, for example, Benin, Comoros, Mauritius and Tunisia. This was reflected in lower Representation scores, as political competition has been limited by government policies and new laws—shown by declines in Credible Elections (Figure 2.3). Note, however, that these declines are from a relatively high level, and all four countries remain above the continental average for Credible Elections. In the case of Tunisia, the recent decline has not erased the improvements made during the democratic transition, and the 2024 election will offer an opportunity for the country's young institutions to regain their footing. It should be noted, however, that the continental average for Credible Elections is worryingly low (0.38). As this factor tracks several others that measure the independence and effectiveness of EMBs, it highlights weakness in a key CI and points to an important area for investment to secure democracy in the region.

Figure 2.2. African countries perform well in Participation, but lag in Rule of Law (graph shows distribution of scores in categories of democratic performance in Africa)



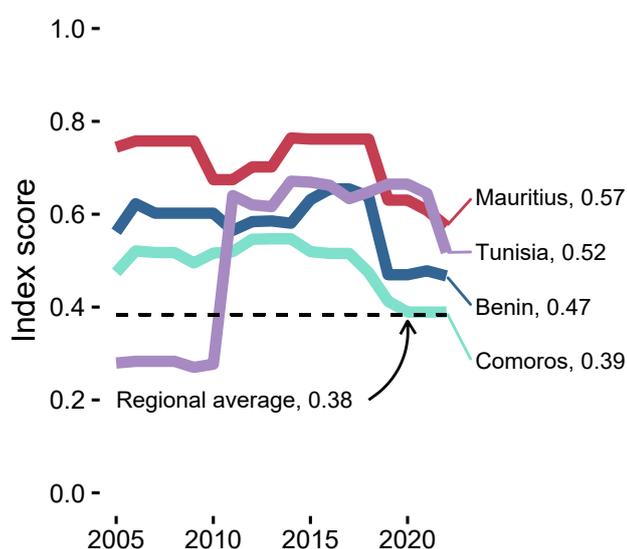
Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

Beyond the conduct of elections, other long-running challenges to the democratic standard of elected government continued to manifest during 2022 and 2023. The evasion of presidential term limits has become an established practice on the continent (examples in the last five years include Côte d'Ivoire, Comoros, Guinea and Togo) (Sampson 2023), and even where such moves have survived constitutional challenges, they set a damaging precedent for the core democratic commitment to the alternation of leadership.

2.2.2. Rights

In a globally comparative context, Rights remain another challenging area in Africa. Only two African countries rank in the top 50 globally in 2022: South Africa and Tunisia. The movements in the rankings in this category between 2021 and 2022 were less dramatic than in Representation; however, Botswana,

Figure 2.3. Benin, Comoros, Mauritius and Tunisia have all suffered declines in Credible Elections since 2015, but remain above the regional average



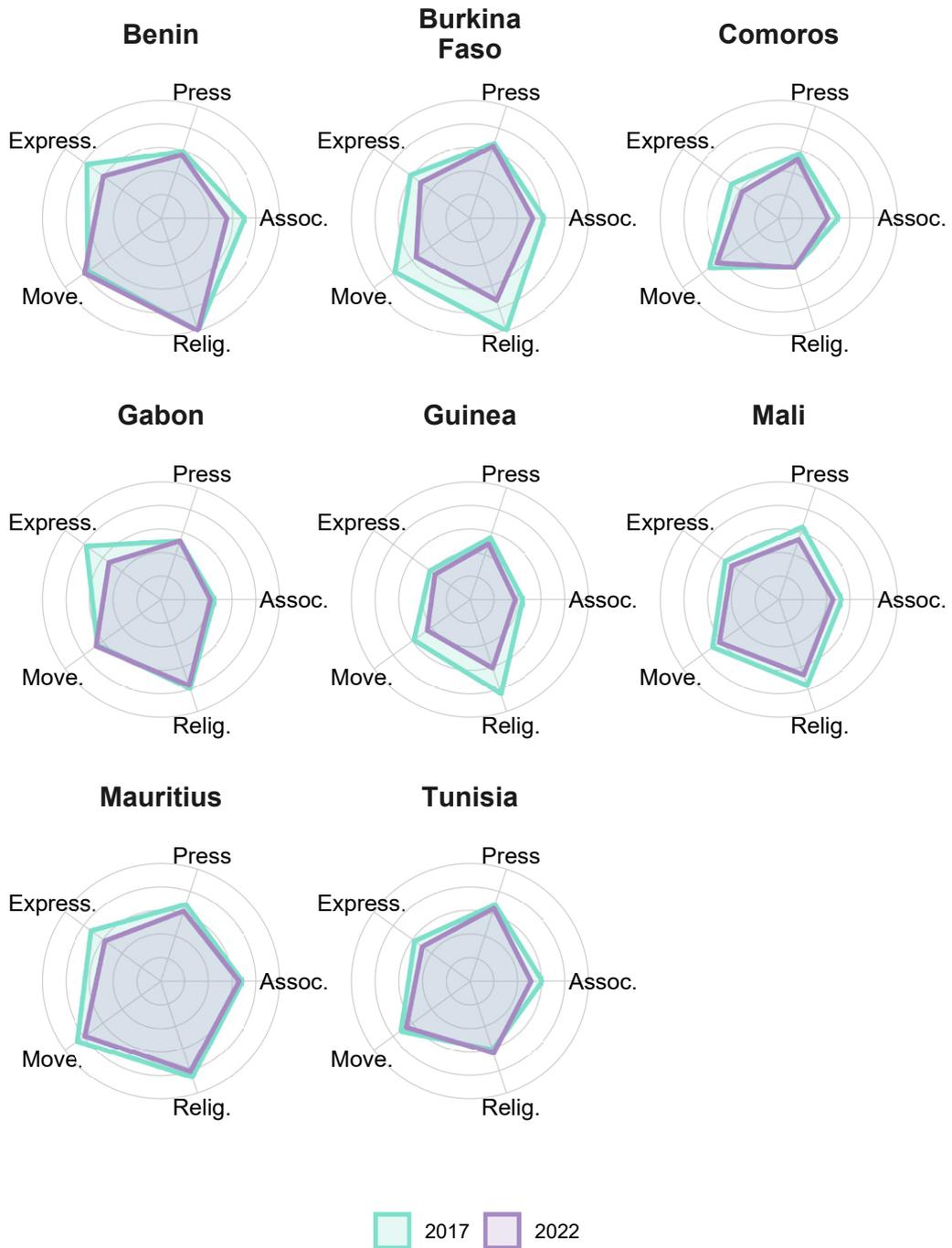
Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

Mali and Ethiopia all fell in the rankings. The biggest gains over one year were made by Zambia, Tanzania and The Gambia.

Within the area of rights, a key focus across Africa is Civil Liberties. There has been concern in many countries about the shrinking of civic space. Due to its dual nature as a civil liberty and an important CI, media freedom deserves special attention. The Freedom of the Press factor has seen significant declines over the last five years in Eswatini, Guinea, Madagascar, Mali, Senegal, South Sudan and Togo. Figure 2.4 illustrates the deterioration in Freedom of Expression, Freedom of the Press, Freedom of Association and Assembly, Freedom of Religion, and Freedom of Movement for the eight countries that have experienced significant declines in their overall score for Civil Liberties over the last five years.

Access to political processes does not depend solely on civic space as broadly understood. It is necessary also to consider the barriers to access and participation that many people face on the basis of ascriptive characteristics such as ethnicity and gender. There has been little significant change across the continent over the last five years in terms of either Social Group Equality or Gender Equality. Gender Equality is a particular area of concern as no African countries are classified as high-performing in this factor of Rights (12 are low performing and 40 are mid-range performing). The World Economic Forum's *Gender Gap Report 2023* stated: 'At the current rate of progress, it will take 102 years to close the gender gap in Sub-Saharan Africa' ([World Economic Forum 2023: 6](#)).

Figure 2.4. Civic space has shrunk in eight African countries



Notes: Press. = Freedom of the Press; Assoc. = Freedom of Association and Assembly; Relig. = Freedom of Religion; Move. = Freedom of Movement; Express. = Freedom of Expression.

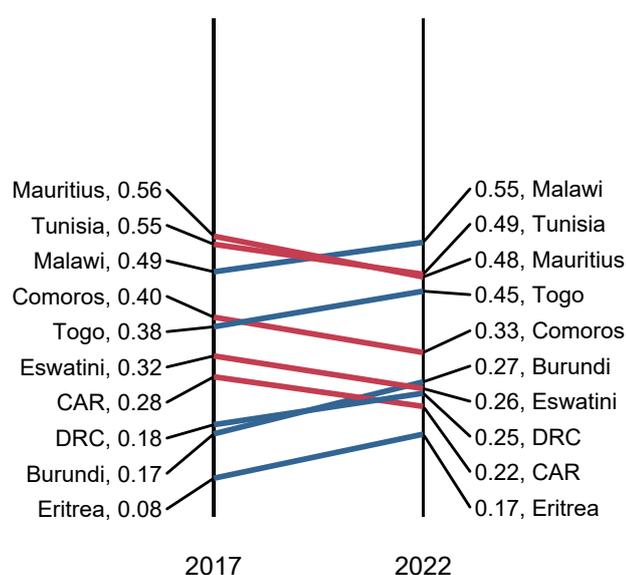
Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

2.2.3. Rule of Law

An area of particular interest, given this Report's focus on the formal and informal institutions and practices that limit state power, is the status of the Rule of Law on the continent. Only three African countries rank among the top 50 globally in this category: Botswana, Namibia and Cabo Verde (see also the case study on Cabo Verde). Over a one-year period, the countries with the most significant falls in the rankings were Tunisia, Mauritius, Burkina Faso and Niger. The biggest gains over the period were in Zambia and Mozambique. Performance in this category was broadly low, but there have been significant advances and declines in countries' performance compared with five years ago (Figure 2.5). Several countries with declines in this area were also noted above, for Representation, but Central African Republic, Comoros, Eswatini, Mauritius and Tunisia also all saw declines, with threats to Judicial Independence a common (but not universal) theme. The countries experiencing advances included some starting from a very low level of performance, but significant improvements were noted in Burundi, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eritrea, Malawi and Togo.

Absence of Corruption stands out as an area of progress in Africa (a departure from the global trend of stagnation), with more countries experiencing significant advances (six) than any other region of the world. Over the last five years Angola, Benin, Burundi, Libya, Sierra Leone and Sudan all saw significant improvements in the Absence of Corruption factor—sometimes despite declines in other areas of democratic health.

Figure 2.5. There have been both advances and declines in Rule of Law in Africa, comparing 2022 to 2017



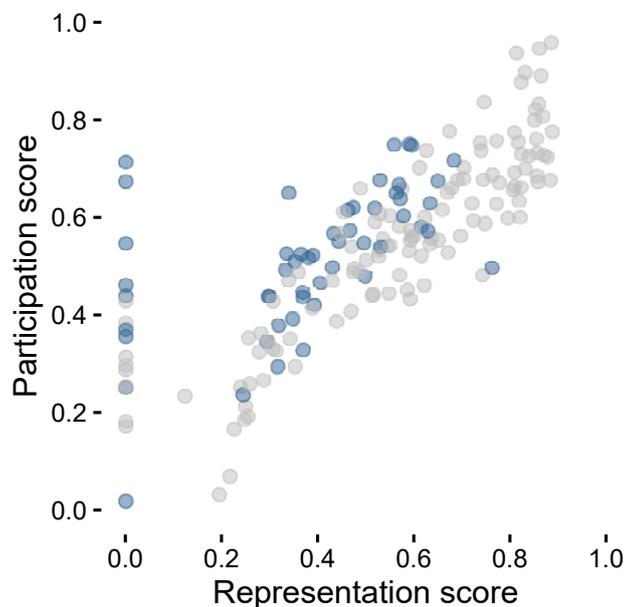
Notes: CAR = Central African Republic; DRC = Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

2.2.4. Participation

Despite the contraction of civic space noted above, the Participation category is an area of strength across the continent. In the other three categories of democratic performance, only two or three African countries are ranked among the world's top 50. In Participation, nine African countries are in the top 50: Mauritius, Sierra Leone, Senegal, Ghana, Mali, Kenya, South Africa, Burkina Faso and Zambia. There was also a great deal of movement in the rankings between 2021 and 2022. The biggest falls were in Tunisia, Burkina Faso and Malawi. At the same time, Kenya and Zambia rose dramatically. The improvement in Zambia is part of a larger pattern of opening up civic space, which has included legislative actions such as the repeal in 2022 of a long-abused colonial-era law criminalizing defamation of the president (Short 2022). As shown in Figure 2.6, across a broad range of values of Representation (a baseline metric of electoral democracy), African countries have higher levels of Participation than countries in other regions with similar Representation scores. This area of democratic performance appears to have some consistency over time.

Figure 2.6. African countries (in blue) have higher Participation scores than might be expected at low levels of Representation



Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

2.3. COUNTERVAILING INSTITUTIONS IN AFRICA

African states were constituted in different ways and have developed differing formal institutions. Despite a prominent executive in many African systems of government, in many countries across the continent there are still strong institutions that could (and often do) serve to limit executive power (Cheeseman 2018). Not all of these are formal institutions, as defined in the constitution, nor are they all found at the domestic level. Instead, CIs in Africa often comprise informal institutions (Chabal and Daloz 1999) and democratic norms developed at the supranational level (Landsberg 2012; Yaya 2014).

At the same time, it must be acknowledged that in many countries CIs and the state itself remain weakly institutionalized. Beyond the executive, the context of dominant party rule presents a challenge to the establishment of effective CIs. In these cases, ruling parties themselves must function as CIs that constrain their own leadership (Prempeh 1996). In countries with a dominant party and a lack of intraparty democracy, courts and fourth-branch institutions must take up the CI functions, guarantee institutional accountability, and police the boundaries between institutional roles (Lotshwao 2009; Gardbaum 2019). Indeed, across the continent courts have emerged as key CIs in themselves and as effective supports for other CIs, such as social movements and fourth-branch institutions (Abebe, Dixon and Ginsburg 2022).

Beyond this horizontal distribution of power, the vertical distribution of power between the central government and subnational governments can also serve as a CI, particularly when different parties are in power at the subnational level (see, for example, Kenya and South Africa). However, such regionally based partisan divisions can also produce conflict.

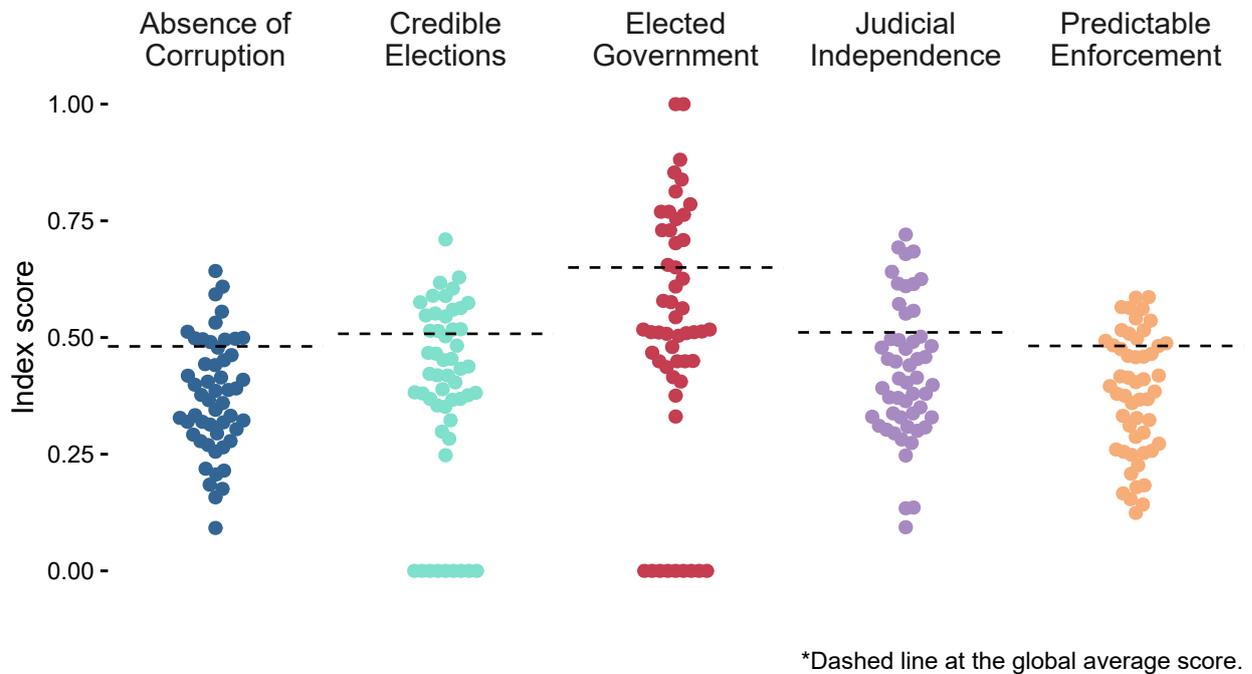
In this context, key GSoD indicators of the health of CIs include Absence of Corruption, Credible Elections, Elected Government, Predictable Enforcement and Judicial Independence. Most African countries perform below the global average for these indicators, and these are key areas for democratic assistance to target (Figure 2.7).

2.3.1. Supranational institutions as countervailing institutions

A distinctive feature of CIs in Africa has been the role of supranational institutions—such as the African Union (AU), the Regional Economic Communities (RECs) and the Regional Mechanisms—in establishing and maintaining democratic norms. These norms are asserted through things like the Constitutive Act of the African Union, which contains a provision for suspending member state governments who come to power through unconstitutional means (Organisation of African Unity 2000: 17), the AU's recent Accra Declaration on Unconstitutional Changes of Government in Africa (African Union 2022), and regional agreements such as the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG) and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR). Among the RECs, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has been especially active, with its military intervention in The Gambia in 2017 seeming to set a precedent for

Despite a prominent executive in many African systems of government, in many countries across the continent there are still strong institutions that could (and often do) serve to limit executive power.

Figure 2.7. Many African countries perform below the global average in indices that measure the effectiveness of CIs



Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

a robust approach to supporting democratic transitions of power (Khadiagala 2018). The 2023 coup d'état in Niger tested ECOWAS's commitment to such forceful approaches, and highlighted the complexities of external support for democracy (Chason 2023). These moves to establish democratic norms have developed alongside other initiatives for continental cooperation, including the African Continental Free Trade Area. In this way, macroeconomic considerations and democratic norms are loosely connected, but often pursued together.

Though it is clear that the AU and RECs have a mandate to both establish and protect these norms, these supranational approaches have met with mixed results—highlighting the limitations of top-down norm enforcement, particularly in the absence of an effective sanctions regime. The limited effectiveness of these supranational institutions has been clear in the failure of any external actor to bring order and protect lives in states experiencing violent conflict during recent years, including Cameroon, Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Mali, South Sudan and Sudan (among others). Member states still prioritize sovereignty over peace. Another notable gap between theory and practice has been state non-compliance with the rulings of regional courts (such as the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights and the ECOWAS Court of Justice) (Ibrahim 2020; Chenwi 2021). It is in the interests of REC and AU member states to take these support and enforcement mechanisms

seriously. Regional stability and prosperity depend on strong democratic and rule of law institutions, but supranational institutions cannot function effectively without the full cooperation and commitment of their member states' national institutions and political leadership.

2.3.2. Domestic institutions as countervailing institutions

The greatest challenge that domestic institutions face in constraining and balancing power is the executive supremacy that characterizes political systems across much of the continent (Prempeh 2008; Heinrich Böll Stiftung 2012; Arriola, Rakner and van de Walle 2022). This is particularly the case for African legislatures, which for a variety of reasons have often lacked the independence and capacity to effectively carry out their legislative and oversight functions (Barkan 2008; Heinrich Böll Stiftung 2012; Opalo 2019). The enabling role that the Central African Republic's National Assembly played in President Touadéra's unconstitutional attempt in 2022 to rewrite the Constitution (including the removal of the presidential term limit) is a stark example of the sort of executive deference that many African legislatures have been criticized for (Gloppen, Gerzso and van de Walle 2022). That opposition legislators were only able to slow the constitutional change by challenging it in the country's Constitutional Court serves to underline the relative weakness of the National Assembly among the country's three branches of government (Vohito 2022; Africa Confidential 2022).

As the Central African Republic case illustrates, the difficulties that many legislatures face in checking overbearing executives means that in Africa this task often falls to the courts. Through the now widespread mechanism of judicial review, this branch is empowered to enforce fundamental rights, constitutional limitations on executive power and, in some senses, broader democratic norms (Prempeh 2006, 2008; Corder 2022). In February 2023, for example, the Kenyan Supreme Court stepped in to protect the rights of the country's vulnerable LGBTQIA+ community, when it ruled that an executive agency's refusal to register an LGBTQIA+ organization as an NGO breached the constitutional right of gay and lesbian Kenyans to freedom of association (Kenya 2023; Kelleher 2023).

Increasingly, African courts are also being called upon to defend electoral integrity. This is often through electoral dispute litigation, such as that which followed the general elections in Nigeria in 2023 and Kenya in 2022, but there are other circumstances in which courts have intervened on questions of electoral integrity (Ezeh 2022; Kenya 2022; Eboh 2023). The opening up of South Africa's elections to independent candidates in 2023, for instance, came about as a result of a judicial review of the country's electoral framework, in which the Constitutional Court found the bar on such candidates to be unconstitutional (South Africa 2020; Gerber 2023). Yet, a lack of judicial independence remains a problem in many parts of Africa. In some countries, such as Senegal and Zimbabwe, it has reached a sufficiently low ebb for the authority of the courts to be turned on government opponents, who have found themselves silenced or marginalized by criminal prosecutions and convictions (Arriola, Rakner and van de Walle 2022; Ndiaye 2023; Chingono 2023). A recent

Increasingly, African courts are being called upon to defend electoral integrity.

example of this appeared to be the treatment of Zimbabwean opposition MP Job Sikhala, whose claim that supporters of the ruling party had killed an opposition activist landed him with a criminal conviction for ‘obstructing the course of justice’, which disqualified him from contesting his seat in the 2023 elections ([Amnesty International 2023](#); [Mutsaka 2023](#); [Nyathi 2023](#)). Even where courts are reasonably independent, however, their capacity to constrain and balance can be curtailed by limited access to justice and weak civil societies because, of course, they can only act on issues brought before them.

In addition to the three branches of government commonly defined in constitutions, since the 1990s many African states have given constitutionally defined independent status to regulatory and oversight bodies that have come to be known as fourth-branch institutions ([Fombad 2016](#); [Bulmer 2019](#); [Tushnet 2021](#)). The number and type of fourth-branch institutions varies, but they commonly include EMBs, ombuds offices, anti-corruption agencies and human rights commissions ([Bulmer 2019](#); [Tushnet 2021](#)). While these institutions are designed to be politically neutral, their work can be highly contentious and they are often subjected to considerable political pressure ([Fombad 2016](#); [Tushnet 2021](#)). Their entrenched status and the support of constitutional courts can be critical to their ability to withstand such pressure and fulfil their functions. This was positively illustrated in the important role played by South Africa’s Constitutional Court in the pioneering anti-corruption work carried out by the Office of the Public Protector ([Tushnet 2021](#); [Khaitan 2023](#)). In contrast, the lead-up to the 2023 Zimbabwean elections was replete with incidents that suggested its EMB, the Zimbabwean Electoral Commission (ZEC), was under the sway of the government ([Africa Confidential 2023a, 2023c](#); [AFP 2023](#)). This occurred despite the fact that ZEC’s independence is entrenched within the country’s Constitution ([Zimbabwe 2013](#); [Fombad 2016](#)).

2.3.3. Popular organization as a countervailing institution

Despite the institutional innovation that has taken place across Africa over the past three decades, formal CIs are not always sufficiently independent or effective. Disenchantment with democratic institutions, particularly legislatures, has pushed many Africans towards alternative forms of political participation, with mass action and protest movements taking on a role as a CI of last resort. Overcoming common exclusionary dynamics, youth political engagement has taken on particular prominence in many countries. The youth are driving new movements demanding improved policies and challenging state-perpetrated human rights abuses. In addition to offering inclusive opportunities for political participation and influence, the resistance committees in Sudan showed, throughout 2022, how effective protest movements can be at depriving undemocratic governments of legitimacy by exposing their abuses and countering their narratives ([Diamond 1994](#); [de Waal 2023](#); see also the case study on Sudan).

In many instances, however, protesters have struggled to achieve their aims. In 2023, for example, the Sudanese junta was able to derail attempts to restore the country’s transition to democracy ([Africa Confidential 2023b](#)). Protests have not been helped by the shrinking of Africa’s civic space noted above in

the section on Rights, particularly the measures some governments have taken to restrict digital communication, such as shutting down the Internet—a key mobilizing tool on a continent where people are increasingly online (Dupuy, Arriola and Rakner 2022; Access Now 2023). Important, too, has been the widespread disruption of protests and detention of protesters by police and security forces (CIVICUS 2022). Yet these protest movements have also been impeded by the internal weaknesses associated with their horizontal structure, including a lack of leadership and a tendency to fracture, both of which have made it difficult for them to maintain their momentum and to influence formal politics (Honwana 2015; Lynch 2022; Dupuy, Arriola and Rakner 2022).

2.4. CONCLUSION

In the African context, potential CIs are found at every level of political engagement: from local community-organizing efforts to the AU's Peace and Security Council. The performance of formal institutions has been mixed, and (with some exceptions) legislatures have not tended to fulfil the role of CIs on the continent. Instead, judiciaries and fourth-branch institutions have been the most effective limitations on executive power. Where formal institutions have proven unable to deliver democratic accountability and voice, new protest movements have been created, potentially providing a people-powered CI. Several hindrances to democratic consolidation across the continent remained pertinent in 2023, namely, heads of state who gain or maintain power in unconstitutional ways, dominant parties that lack internal democracy, weak parliaments, unaccountable police and security forces, endemic corruption and the negative effects of geopolitical competition for influence in Africa. Efforts to support CIs must take on these problems, and find innovative ways to constrain and balance executive power and thereby support democratic consolidation.

Potential CIs are found at every level of political engagement: from local community-organizing efforts to the AU's Peace and Security Council.



Chapter 3

WESTERN ASIA

Key findings

- The trend of personalized authoritarianism, in which concentrated power and control over state resources are in the hands of a small group of elites, has been on the rise in Western Asia, albeit in different forms. This was evident in significant developments in Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia in 2022 and has allowed political and economic elites to undermine and prevent the establishment of effective countervailing institutions.
- Authoritarian practices have intensified in Bahrain, Iran, Jordan, Palestine, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates, and have evolved to include the use of new surveillance and cybertechnologies, which have produced dangerous patterns of coercion.
- Authoritarianism in Western Asia has endured partly because of the economic and security interests of foreign powers, meaning they offer only selective support for democracy and human rights, as seen in Iraq, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Yemen.
- Yet, social resistance continues to flourish, as seen recently in Iran and Israel. Mass protests have taken on new forms and continue to challenge entrenched power structures, although their levels of success vary. Popular mobilization's potential to act as a check on executive power offers a glimmer of hope.

3.1. INTRODUCTION

Western Asia is the most authoritarian region in the world and is marked by stark economic and social disparities (IMF 2023). In recent years, long-standing patterns of authoritarianism have become even more entrenched, largely through personalized centralization of power and intensified repressive practices. In fact, Western Asia exhibits a higher level of authoritarianism than in the period before the Arab Uprisings, with the majority of countries ranking below 100 in various categories of the GSoD Indices. In 2022, the population in 9 of the 14 Western Asian countries lived under regimes with low levels of performance in Rights, Rule of Law and Representation (Figure 3.1).

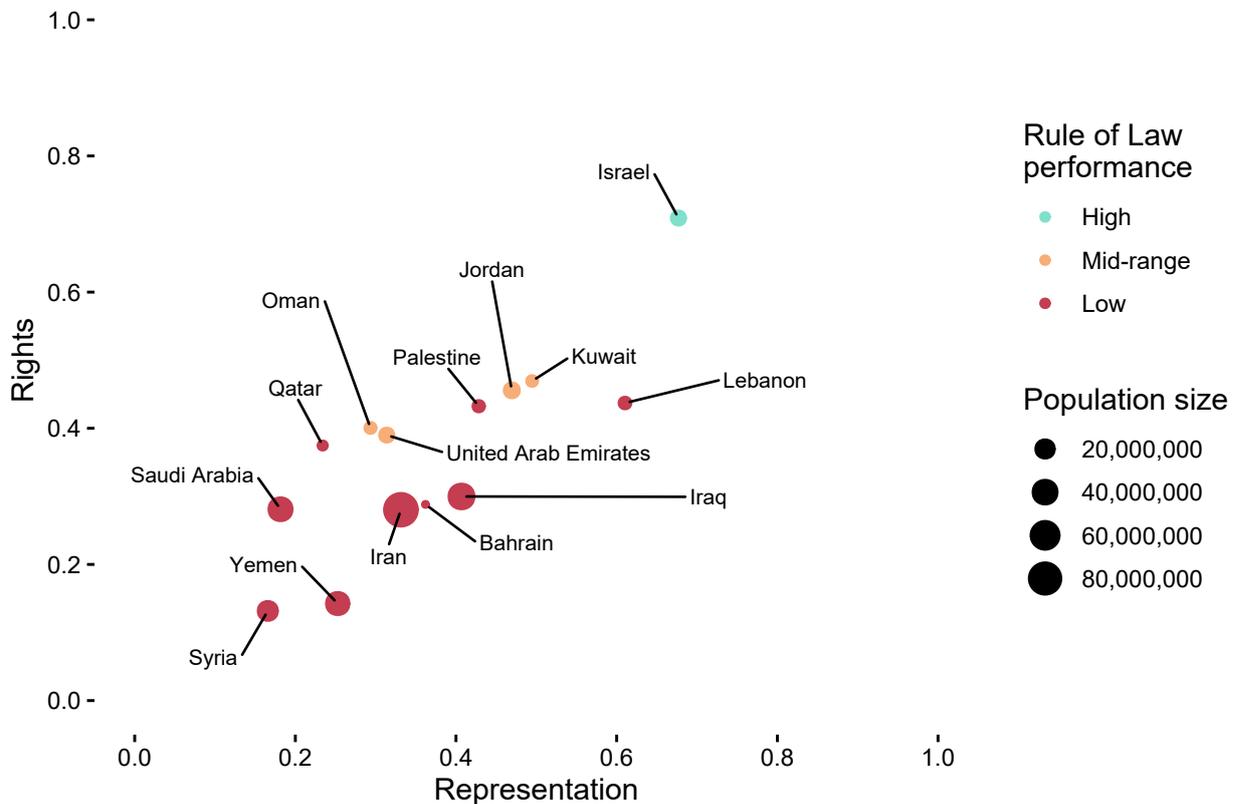
Against this backdrop, CIs have had little chance to develop. Courts and legislatures are regularly co-opted by powerful executives, and several countries do not hold elections for executive leadership. ‘Strongmen rulers’ across the region support each other and have long relied on their countries’ vast natural resource wealth to maintain the status quo and avoid any international accountability for human rights violations. At the same time, governments have largely failed to address weak growth rates, high levels of government debt, high unemployment and inflation. Economic and social disparities have thus continued and grown, exacerbating conflict (Gatti et al. 2023; Amnesty International 2023). Even in countries such as Israel and Lebanon, which have historically been stronger than others in the region in terms of democratic growth, instability threatens the gains. Palestine stands out for having experienced significant declines in the Rights and Rule of Law categories overall, as well as the related factors of Access to Justice, Freedom of Expression, Freedom of the Press, Political Equality, Gender Equality and Judicial Independence (Figure 3.2). Qatar experienced modest improvements in Representation, while Iraq and Lebanon are notable for the pause in their progress. Since 2012, the war in Yemen has prompted significant declines across all GSoD indicators. Also notable is Israel, which experienced significant declines in Access to Justice in 2022. Still, it remains the only country with high levels of democratic performance across most categories, although the GSoD Indices do not measure Israel’s undemocratic actions in Palestine.

Still, one hopeful sign is mass demonstrations, which have continued to mark the region in 2022 and 2023. People’s growing anger, especially with regard to socio-economic difficulties, offers some openings for positive reform. Moreover, despite challenges, civil society in some countries continues to campaign for change. Sustained and widespread mobilization is necessary to bring about significant transformation, as governments often resort to repression and limited reforms to preserve their power (O’Driscoll et al. 2020).

Unlike for many other regions, GSoD data for Western Asia show very little change over the last five years (Figure 3.3). In many cases, however, the last decade is marked by important variations. This section therefore focuses on both 5-year and 10-year trends.

Western Asia is the most authoritarian region in the world and is marked by stark economic and social disparities

Figure 3.1. The most populous countries in the region perform at a low level in Rights, Representation and Rule of Law in 2022



Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023; United Nations Population Division, World Population Prospects: 2022 Revision.

3.2. THE STATE OF DEMOCRACY IN WESTERN ASIA

3.2.1. Representation

The space for inclusive governance and political competition in Western Asia remains limited, with 65 per cent of countries in the region performing at low levels in Representation. Intra-regional variation is stark: the top Western Asian countries in the rankings for Representation are Israel (ranked at 38) and Kuwait (102). Kuwait rose six places between 2021 and 2022, following the general elections held in September 2022 (although results were annulled by the Constitutional Court in March 2023) (DW 2023). Concurrently, Iraq (106) dropped four places compared with 2021, with significant declines in Effective Parliament following the year-long political deadlock that resulted from the contested 2021 elections. Significant declines in Iran in Credible Elections, Effective Parliament and Elected Government reveal a deterioration in the legitimacy of electoral processes and representative institutions since 2017. While there were advances in Qatar over the last five years, they were due solely to the holding of the country's first legislative elections in 2021 and do

Figure 3.2. Trends of democratic performance in Palestine



Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

not necessarily represent meaningful change, especially since the elections were marked by non-inclusive participation (Al Jazeera 2021).

3.2.2. Rights

More than half the countries in the region have low scores in Rights, with Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Yemen among the bottom 50 globally. In the global rankings for Rights, only Israel (ranked at 37) and Kuwait (99) are positioned above 100, with relatively large falls observed in Jordan (down 13 to 100) and Israel (down 7 to 37). Civil Liberties, in particular, has seen major declines in the last five years and the regional average for the category is among the lowest in the world. Shrinking civic space is a concern; significant declines have occurred in Freedom of Expression, Freedom of the Press, and Freedom of Association and Assembly since 2012.

These declines have taken place amid a rise in digital authoritarianism. Leaders across the region have used technology to silence political opposition and popular mobilization through surveillance, censorship, disinformation and information manipulation (Lynch 2022; Jones 2023). It is noteworthy that, despite the scores for Rights in Western Asia being among the lowest in the world, the region has high levels of performance in Basic Welfare (Figure 3.4). This is largely due to its abundant oil wealth, which has been instrumental in maintaining autocratic rule and preventing events similar to the Arab Uprisings.

More than 70 per cent of countries exhibit low performance in Political Equality. Equality between genders continues to be a challenge, with the Gender Equality factor performing well below the global average across the

Figure 3.3. Distribution of scores in categories of democratic performance in Western Asia

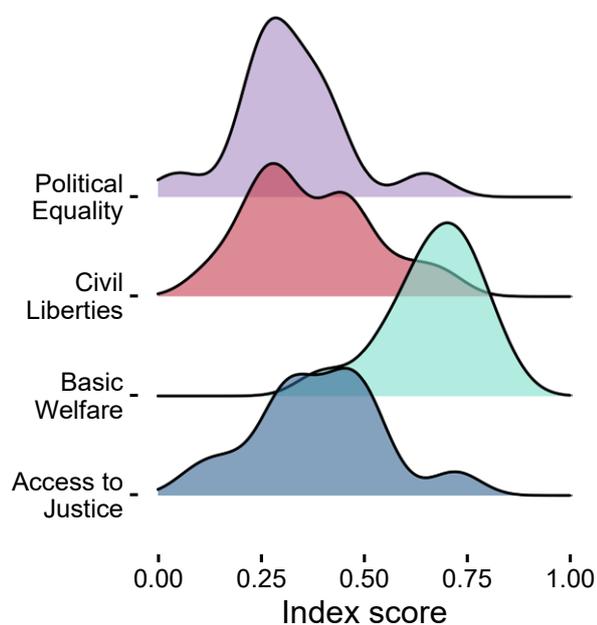


Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

region. Saudi Arabia has seen some advances in this regard, but the gains are marginal in a context where women's rights activists continue to be jailed (HRW 2019a; *The Economist* 2023).

Israel remains the only country with high performance in Rights in the region, although it has seen a significant decline in Access to Justice between 2021 and 2022. This decline takes place amid controversial judicial reforms that critics say will allow significantly increased government control over the Supreme Court (Hudson 2023). Concurrently, significant declines in the Rights category in Palestine since 2017—including in Access to Justice and in Political Equality—are concerning, especially in the context of generalized declines in the other top-level categories of Participation and Rule of Law.

Figure 3.4. Distribution of Rights performance across factors in Western Asia, 2022



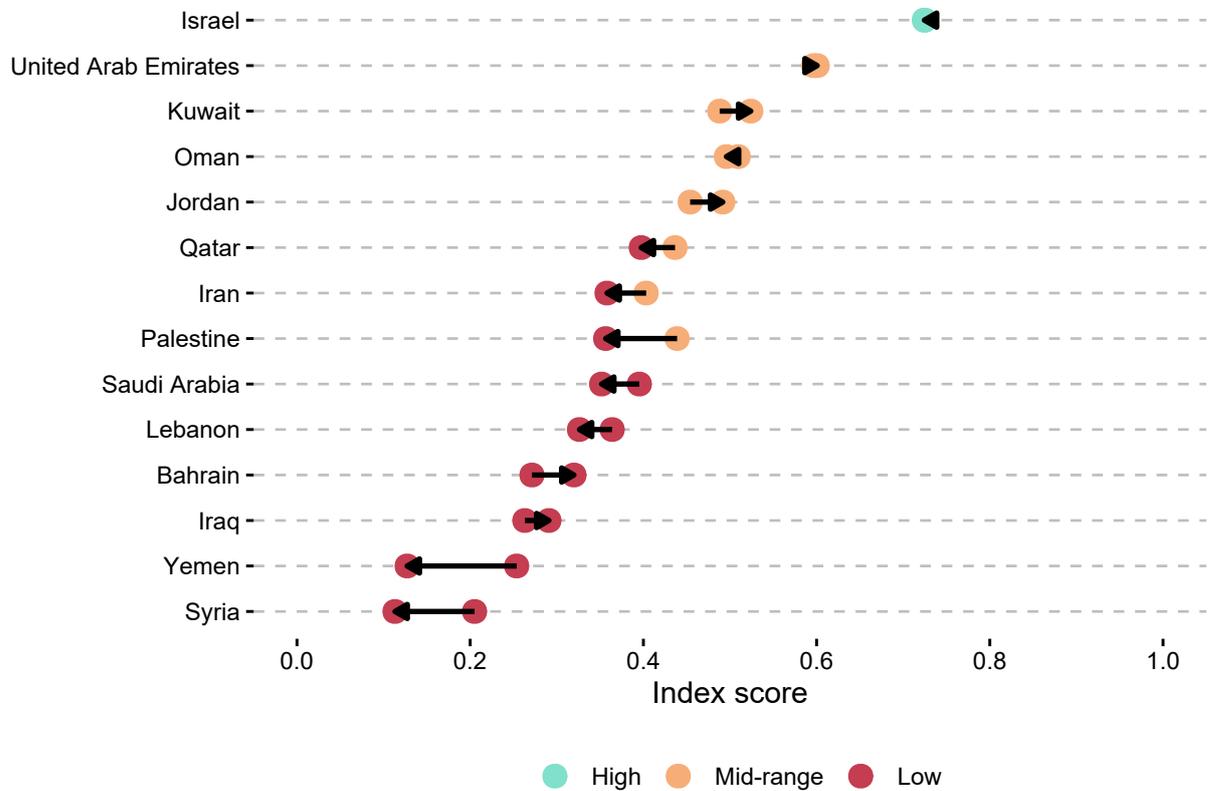
Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

3.2.3. Rule of Law

Although Rule of Law did not see any major movements in the last five years, the regional average for the category has been consistently in decline over the last decade (Figure 3.5). Power and wealth have become increasingly centralized and personalized, with regimes undermining checks and balances and the rule of law to clamp down on opposition (Ruiz de Elvira, Schwarz and Weipert-Fenner 2018). This has been done through top-down reforms designed to preserve the power of a regime within existing governance structures, institutionalized repression and corruption (Frantz et al. 2021; Transparency International 2023). Since 2017, Palestine (ranked at 127) and Syria (171) have seen significant declines in Rule of Law, and between 2021 and 2022, both countries fell seven places in the Rule of Law rankings.

A notable example of the aggrandizement of power is Saudi Arabia, where Mohammed bin Salman has consolidated power by taking over political and economic responsibilities traditionally held by other members of the royal family. This has included the Bureau of Investigation and Prosecution, a somewhat independent agency formerly under the Ministry of Interior (HRW 2019c; Rahman 2020). In Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu returned to office in December 2022, despite being embroiled in multiple corruption cases. Since then, he has pushed for reforms that would allow him to escape those cases, effectively erode checks and balances, and benefit his far-right government coalition (Nai and Toros 2020; Ferber 2023; Eisen, Patel and Smith 2023).

Figure 3.5. Changes in Rule of Law in Western Asia 2012–2022



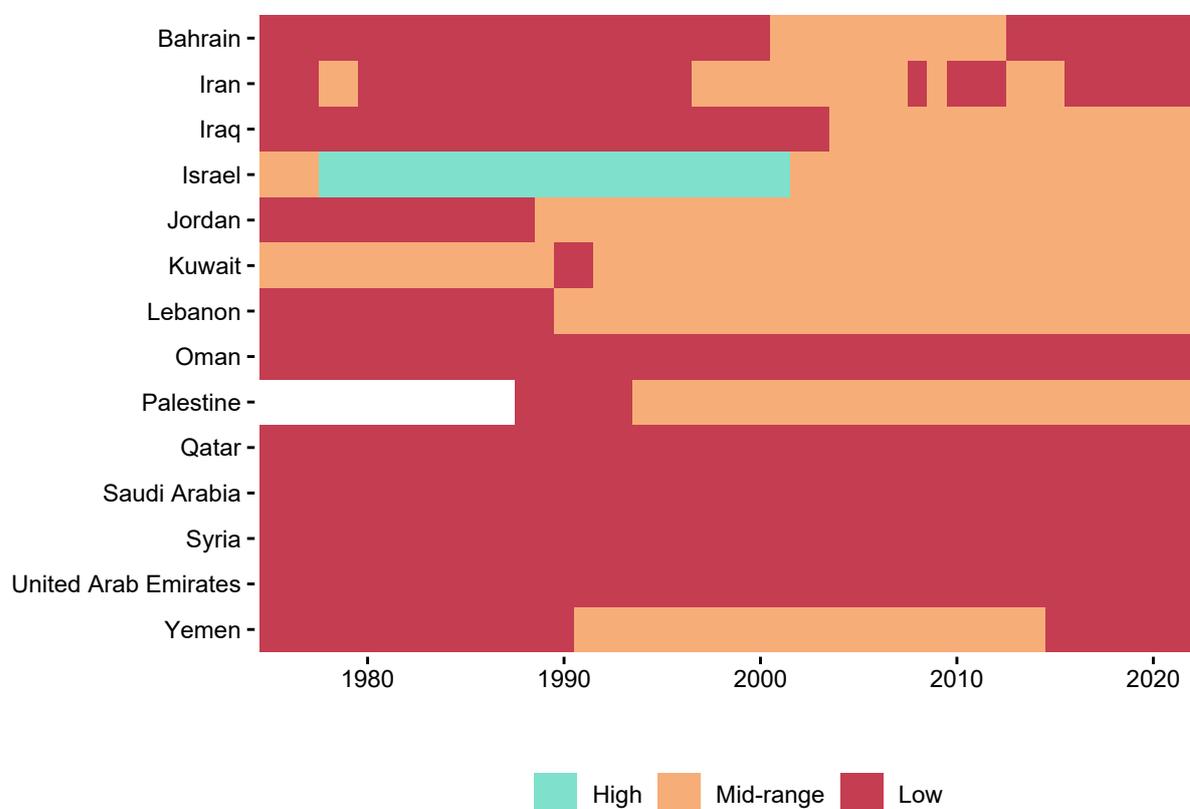
Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

3.2.4. Participation

There have been no significant changes in the region's performance levels in Participation since 2017. Approximately 70 per cent of countries in Western Asia are among the bottom 50 globally (Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, United Arab Emirates and Yemen), and there are no high-performing countries in 2022. Israel fell three places in the rankings for Participation (to 38), while Palestine (ranked at 133) dropped eight places over the past year. Israel's new government introduced a bill that has raised concerns about its potential to curtail the work of NGOs and civil society. The bill proposes imposing high taxes on foreign funding received by NGOs, and many believe this could severely impact their ability to operate. Critics argue that the bill is an attempt to silence dissent and curtail the work of organizations critical of Israeli policies (Freedman 2023; FMEP 2023; Middle East Eye 2023; OHCHR 2023c). Jordan also fell in the rankings for Participation in 2022 (down 16 places to 119), following various efforts by the government to suppress dissent and curtail the activities of CSOs (HRW 2022b).

Citizens' limited participation in decision-making processes is identified as a key challenge for democracy in the region as evidenced in the stagnation of

Figure 3.6. Performance in Participation over time in Western Asia



Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

this category since the 1980s (Figure 3.6). More than a decade after the Arab Uprisings, popular grievances remain unaddressed across the region, as space for civil and political participation has become increasingly restricted. At the same time, social resistance continues to exist and flourish, as seen in recent events in Iran and Israel. Mass protests have taken on new forms and continue to challenge entrenched power structures, although their levels of success vary. This type of civic engagement is described in detail in Section 3.3.2.

3.3. COUNTERVAILING INSTITUTIONS IN WESTERN ASIA

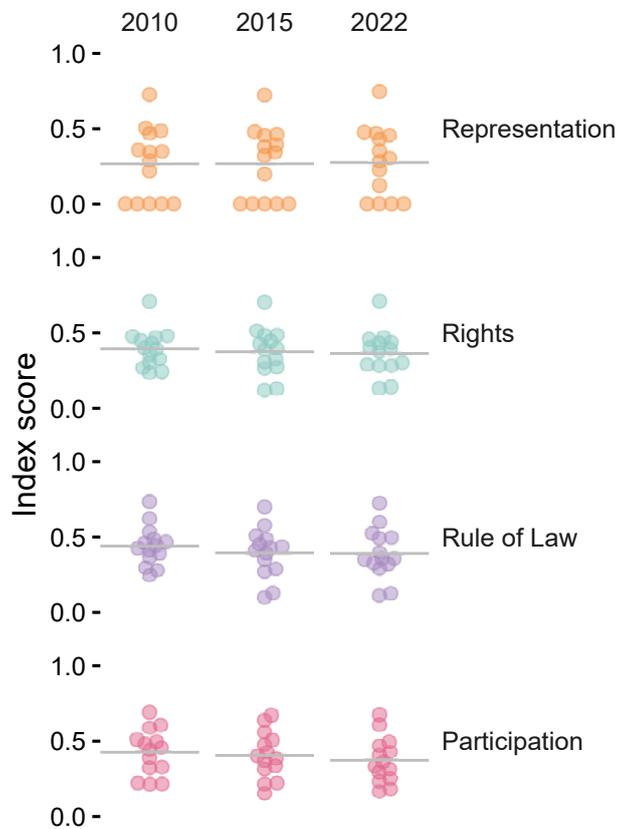
In many Western Asian countries, the separation of powers exists in law but not in practice. Powerful executives dominate the political landscape, often influencing decision making in other branches of government and blocking the development of independent agencies and other non-state forms of checks on power. Even where reforms have been embarked upon, such as in Bahrain, Jordan, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Syria, they have been manipulated to work in favour of ruling executives (Maboudi 2022). Courts and parliaments

In many Western Asian countries, the separation of powers exists in law but not in practice.

have played a central role in propping up autocratic rule. At the international level, CIs are also largely ineffectual, often because the region's leaders are necessary allies for other countries' geopolitical security interests.

Over time, this has left a mark on the populace. Recent public opinion data reveal widespread dissatisfaction with post-Arab Uprisings outcomes (Yildirim and McCain 2019; Cordesman 2020). CIs related to the rule of law are especially weak, with corruption a particular challenge (see Figure 3.8). Indeed, the regional average for Absence of Corruption has long hovered around the boundary between low and mid-range performance, as leaders use oil wealth to build patronage networks and centralize power (Haas 2019; Frantz et al. 2021). This eroded public trust in government and weakened institutions. In 2022, a regional survey found that 87 per cent of the population considered corruption to be widespread, including in state institutions—with legislators and government officials seen as the most corrupt by 44 per cent of people in Western Asia (Kukutschka and Vrush 2019; Arab Opinion Index 2022).

Figure 3.7. Category performance levels before and after the Arab Uprisings compared with 2022



Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

Figure 3.8. Absence of Corruption scores in Western Asia, 2022



Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

3.3.1. Supranational institutions as countervailing institutions

Many countries in Western Asia have long been indispensable allies for much of the rest of the world, primarily because of their substantial oil reserves, their geostrategic location and their role in anti-terrorism efforts. As a result, international bodies have failed to act as effective influences with regard to democratic growth; instead, strategic political interests have often trumped pro-democracy priorities and human rights concerns (Sever 2018; Hinnebusch 2018; Ardemagni 2022).

There has been notable resistance, for example, to holding the Saudi Arabian Government accountable for flagrant human rights violations, and a US veto in the UN Security Council has limited justice for Palestinians and a murdered Al Jazeera journalist (Amnesty International 2022b; Al Jazeera 2023b). Western governments have made generous financial contributions to repressive regimes, including Iraq, Syria and many others, in the name of fighting terrorism (Stimson Center 2018; Radwan 2020). Some have also stepped in to help, as governments in the region have increased their focus on security and the military in the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings (Lamont and van der Harst 2015). China and Israel have contributed to digital repression through the

diffusion of relevant tools and technologies to authoritarian regimes (Shtaya 2022; Chack 2023; Gering 2023).

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nations have especially benefited from the new, emerging multipolar global order and increased oil and infrastructure investment from Eastern powers. Improved relations and engagement with countries such as China and Russia have further reduced the incentives for GCC countries to implement good governance (Ghafar 2022; Webster and Pelayo 2023).

Three of the main regional bodies (the League of Arab States, the GCC and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation) have also failed to act as democratic influences, choosing instead to support each other in the quest to preserve power, and failing to prioritize public interests (Freer 2022). Indeed, these bodies have supported each other in various ways (including financial and military help) to repress protests and silence dissent (Hinnebusch 2018; Blaydes, Hamzawy and Sallam 2022). Recent normalization of relations with Syria, despite its notorious human rights violations, highlights a long-standing willingness to disregard accountability and justice in favour of elite interests and the maintenance of the status quo (Al Jazeera 2023a; Faucon and Said 2023).

Political systems in the region are characterized by strong executive authority, significant electoral personalism, fragile institutions and inadequate oversight mechanisms.

3.3.2. Domestic institutions as countervailing institutions

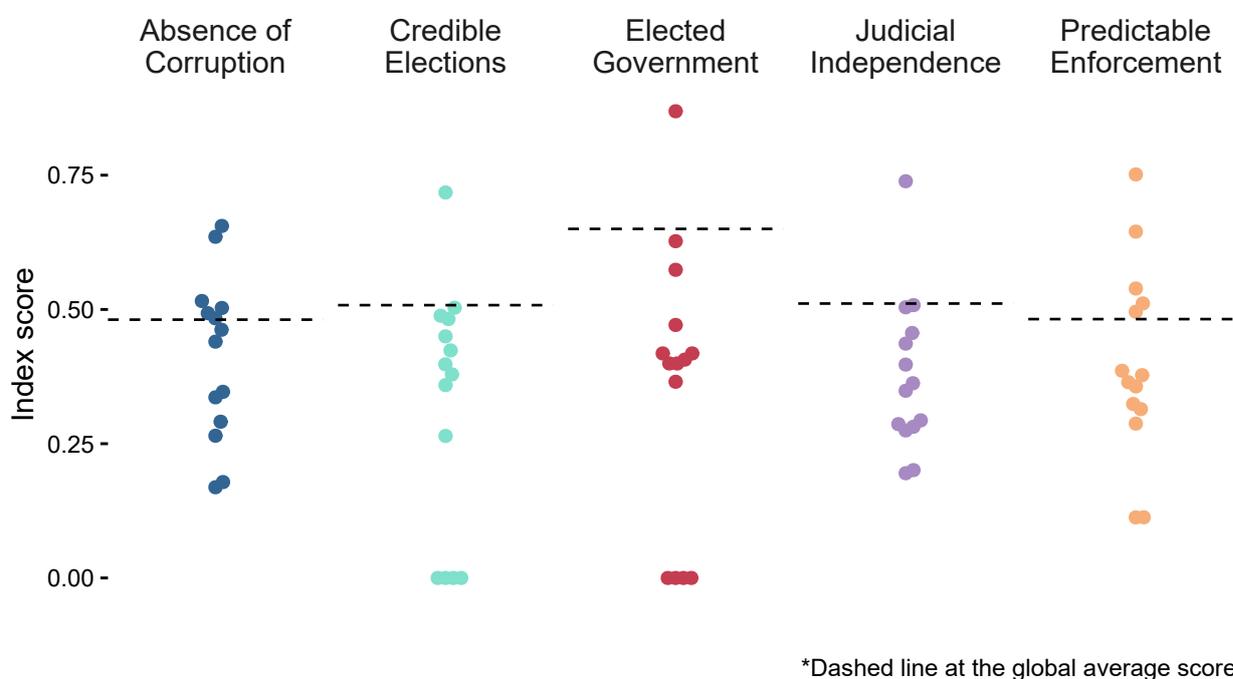
Political systems in the region are characterized by strong executive authority, significant electoral personalism, fragile institutions and inadequate oversight mechanisms that impede democratic consolidation (Figure 3.9). This centralization of power is further exacerbated by the trend of power personalization and the capture of state institutions, as seen in countries such as Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia. The rise of digital authoritarianism hampers the effectiveness of domestic institutions and accountability mechanisms, as well as civil society (Lynch, Schwedler and Yom 2022; Barnes-Dacey, Geranmayeh and Lovatt 2018; Dana 2021; Aldoughli 2022). Despite these challenges, public participation provides hope. Iran and Israel have been sites of notable social unrest, with protests that exemplify a deeper quest for freedom and equality. The potential for popular mobilization to work as a check on executive power offers a glimmer of hope for the region and is a focus for this Report's policy recommendations.

Limited space for representative governance

Since the Arab Uprisings, Western Asia has seen some increased political competition and a greater focus on electoral reform. However, incumbent regimes have manipulated the legal framework governing elections, political parties and civil society to co-opt opposition actors and block any meaningful change. While some regimes have made limited concessions to project an appearance of political competition, true power-sharing and open competition remain restricted.

In Jordan, a series of constitutional amendments that were meant to strengthen public representation and government accountability restricted

Figure 3.9. Scores in factors relating to CIs in Western Asia in 2022



Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

the parliament's ability to oversee royal appointments, thereby consolidating the power of King Abdullah II. Subsequently, in 2022, changes granted the monarch authority to appoint and dismiss members of the ministerial cabinet and the Senate and to dissolve parliament (Karmel 2022; Maboudi 2022). Moreover, new laws introduced in 2022 have raised concerns about the risks of potentially marginalizing small parties and candidates with limited resources. Certain political parties and independently elected trade unions were dissolved after members expressed opposition. The establishment of the secretive General Security Council has also led to concerns about accountability and transparency (Merhej 2022). According to a report by Human Rights Watch, this is part of a broader pattern of repression, in which authorities have used various laws to suppress political dissent (HRW 2022b).

Similarly, 2023 amendments to the electoral law in Iraq, proposed by the ruling Coordination Framework political bloc, sparked widespread protests, amid concerns that these would allow larger political factions to manipulate the electoral system and consolidate their power. Despite the fact that the current law was passed in response to nationwide protests in 2019, which had demanded more independent political actors, the new amendment could suppress these independents and smaller parties, thereby consolidating the power of larger political factions (International IDEA 2023a; Tuna Aygün 2023; Al-Monitor 2023).

While concentrated executive power is a primary hindrance to effective representation, parliamentary inefficiency is also a significant challenge. The inability to form a stable coalition has perpetuated a cycle of elections and caretaker governments across Western Asia, further exacerbating inefficiencies. In Iraq and Lebanon, for example, political deadlock has delayed or blocked legislation and much-needed economic reforms. In Lebanon, an unprecedented 'double executive vacuum' after a year-long political deadlock left the country without an elected president or prime minister ([Khatib and Wallace 2021](#); [Reuters 2022](#)). Also, the ethno-sectarian power-sharing systems are dominated by leaders able to paralyse government institutions over conflicting policies or reform. They are inherently prone to deadlock and have contributed to unresponsive governments ([Sallon 2022](#); [The World Bank 2022](#)).

In Kuwait, although the National Assembly is essential for checking the executive and has more independence and influence than in other Gulf monarchies, the system often results in political deadlocks, repeated dissolutions of parliament and snap elections. Between 2022 and 2023, for instance, Kuwaitis experienced an election recall, the reinstatement of a previous legislature and a rerun election. Unsurprisingly, Kuwaitis were frustrated by this, and voter participation was relatively low (59 per cent) ([International IDEA 2023b](#); [Times Kuwait 2023](#)). This scenario illustrates the ongoing political crisis and inefficacy in Kuwait's parliament. Despite some opposition victories and increased female representation, the 2023 vote did not bring about significant change or resolve the long-standing political stalemate. The tension between the legislative and executive branches, worsened by the lack of recognized political parties, leads to inefficacy. The crown prince's repeated dissolutions of parliament have escalated the crisis and frequent political disputes have caused discontent among Kuwait's elite. This highlights the critical need for better cooperation between Kuwait's parliament and cabinet to promote stability and progress ([Yom 2022](#); [Al Jazeera 2023c](#); [Bishara 2023](#)).

In Israel, parliamentary efficacy is hindered by deadlock. Since 2019, there have been five elections, all a result of the inability of the country's political parties to form stable coalitions because of ideological differences and personal conflicts ([Kingsley 2022](#)). Although Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's party has been able to lead a coalition since winning the 2022 election, proposed reforms have been very controversial and reflect deep-seated societal divisions. Some of the tension is due to a proportional representation electoral system, which allowed Netanyahu to win despite garnering almost the same number of votes as the opposition. This political crisis has significantly undermined public trust and confidence in democracy, institutions, and political leaders. Moreover, since the formation of the new government in December 2022, characterized as the most far-right and religiously conservative in the country's history, the growing influence of the ultra-Orthodox community and its alliances with right-wing parties have made tensions worse ([Oren and Waxman 2023](#); [Chotiner 2023](#); [Times of Israel 2023](#); [Krämer 2023](#)).

Weaponized judiciary

Another major hindrance to democratic consolidation in the region is ineffective judicial systems, which have been unable to act as effective CIs and guarantors of rights (Al Zumai 2022). The integrity of these judiciaries is compromised by political interference, corruption, clientelism and executive-influenced appointment processes. A primary example is Jordan, where recent constitutional amendments have subverted the courts' independence by granting King Abdullah II the power to appoint key judicial figures (Haas 2019; Davis 2022; Al Naimat 2022). The monarchy has since employed the judiciary to suppress dissent and maintain the status quo. Jordanian authorities have passed restrictive laws, used judicial harassment and conducted arbitrary arrests and detentions to curtail the activities of civil society (HRW 2022b).

Similarly, while judicial independence is guaranteed by law in Qatar, the Emir effectively controls the judiciary by appointing all its members (OHCHR 2020; Al Meezan n.d.). Recently, a Qatari criminal court imposed life sentences on several citizens for their participation in peaceful protests, thereby highlighting the lack of judicial independence (GCHR 2022). Recent reforms in Bahrain have strengthened the monarchy's ability to dissolve opposition and legitimize state violence. Dissidents face inhumane treatment, including mass arrests and torture, while the courts turn a blind eye to such abuses (El Yaakoubi 2020; Amnesty International UK 2022). Similarly, Mohammed bin Salman in Saudi Arabia has implemented judicial reforms under the guise of delivering a more liberal, accountable and equitable justice system. However, these changes have instead facilitated widespread human rights violations, including extrajudicial killings, sham trials and limited investigations (HRW 2019b, 2021; DAWN 2020; Rashad 2021). Iran also falls short in providing fair trials, due process rights and humane prison conditions. Iranian courts often rely on illegally obtained evidence and disregard allegations of torture, while restricting access to legal counsel (HRW 2022a).

The few success stories (such as Kuwait's Constitutional Court overturning a law criminalizing transgenderedness) have been exceptional (Amnesty International 2022a). The regional norm is that courts (like other potential state CIs) are subverted and end up fulfilling the role of guarantor for authoritarian leaders and regimes. Even where overall democratic performance has improved, persistent institutional weaknesses have been noted. For example, while Lebanese law provides for an independent and impartial judiciary, in practice the courts have been subject to political influence. This has been evidenced in the Beirut blast investigations, which have been hampered by the lack of an independent judiciary and persisting political interference (OHCHR 2023b).

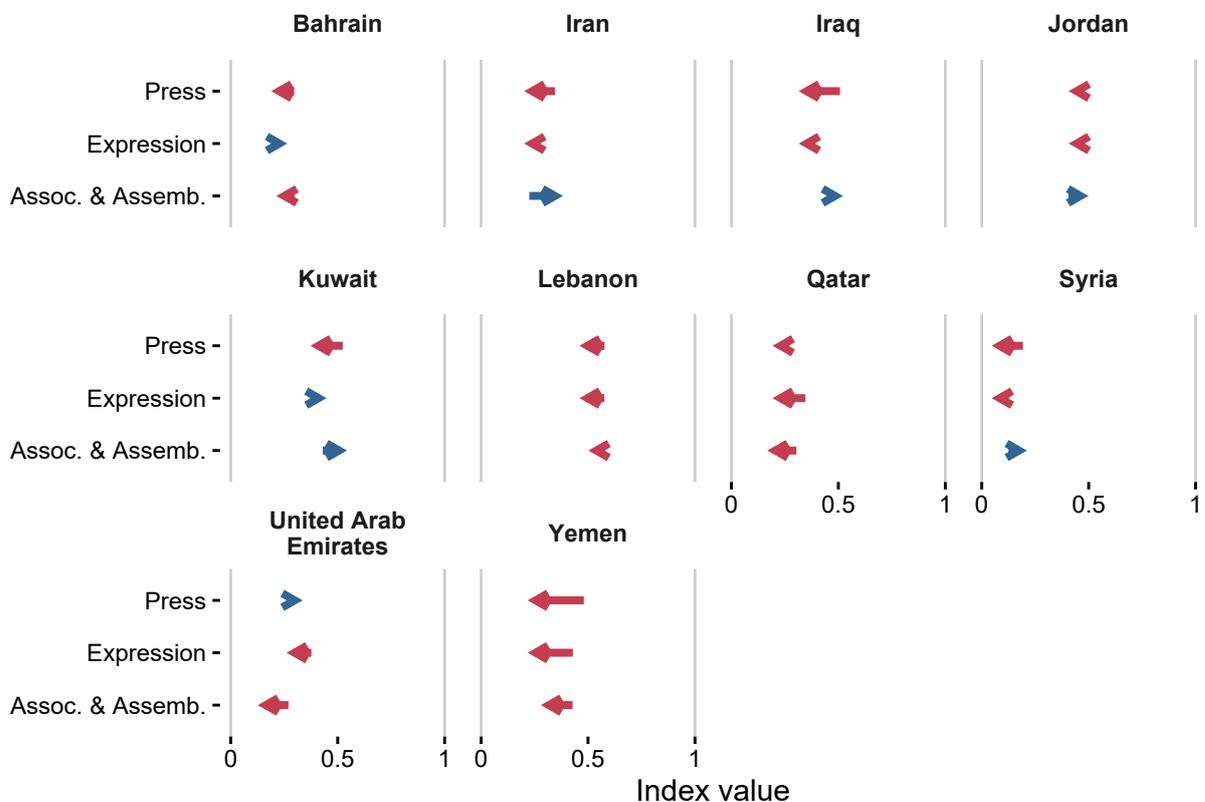
A concerning trend about the justice system across Western Asia has emerged in 2022 and 2023, with an uptick in human rights violations across the region, notably in executions in Bahrain, Iran and Saudi Arabia. In addition, the judiciary has played a crucial role in enforcing repressive cybercrime legislation, which is increasingly misused by governments to silence dissent and exacerbate autocratic practices.

Deepening repressive practices and the rise of digital authoritarianism

The advent of digital technologies has had a profound impact on societies across Western Asia, facilitating both public empowerment and government repression (Lamensch 2021). While social media and messaging apps have enabled activists to communicate, organize themselves and expose instances of abuse by state authorities, the same technologies have also been weaponized by governments for censorship, surveillance and intimidation, leading to arrests and imprisonments (Lynch 2022; OHCHR 2023d; Rosson and Anthonio 2023; Maboudi 2022). All the countries that experienced protests have seen a decline in at least one of the factors of Civil Liberties (Figure 3.10).

Digital authoritarianism has significantly altered the balance of power in Western Asia, reshaping both civil society and the media landscape. Governments across the region have leveraged cybercrime laws to suppress civic freedoms, curb free expression and control information

Figure 3.10. Shrinking civic space across Western Asia amid increased surveillance and harassment of journalists with limitations on Freedoms of the Press, Expression, and Association and Assembly (arrows begin at 2012 value and end at 2022 value)



Note: Assoc. & Assemb. = Association and Assembly.

Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

access (Polyakova and Meserole 2019). Often justified under the guise of counterterrorism or combating ‘misinformation’, these laws have become tools for penalizing dissenters and journalists (Simon, Lauría and Flores 2023).

This has occurred in Bahrain, Iran, Israel, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria and United Arab Emirates, where regimes have adopted legislation to approve and expand the surveillance powers of the security agencies (Adami 2022). As scores in Civil Society have declined, leaders are increasingly using digital technology to bolster their control (Maboudi 2022).

In Saudi Arabia, such laws have been used to silence critics, as evidenced by a case involving a cleric who disappeared after criticizing government reforms (New Arab 2023). Meanwhile, Israel has seen continued attacks on journalists covering military operations in the West Bank, justified under the auspices of cybercrime legislation (Laine 2023). Jordan has also witnessed the misuse of cybercrime laws, with two journalists detained under such legislation (Zemelyte 2022). This followed the approval of a new cybercrime law by King Abdullah II in August 2023, despite widespread criticism of its vague and repressive nature (Al Jazeera 2023d; HRW 2023; Osman 2023). The law grants the government enhanced authority over online content, leading to a decline in freedom of speech and a shrinking of civic space (OHCHR 2023e).

In response to the protests ignited by Mahsa Amini’s death in 2022, the Iranian Government has escalated its use of digital surveillance technologies for repression during 2023. Tactics have included large-scale Internet shutdowns and extensive social media censorship, employed to stifle dissent and control the narrative (Meuse 2023). Notably, the authorities have been able to monitor and manipulate protesters’ mobile communications, gaining an inside view of their activities (Biddle and Hussain 2022). Despite ongoing unrest and indications of governmental instability, the Iranian authorities persist in leveraging these digital technologies for repression, contributing to an expanding trend of digital authoritarianism (Alterman 2022; HRW 2022a).

The power of protest

The trend of digital authoritarianism is rising, but civic engagement remains a potent force for democratic accountability, acting as a safeguard against executive overreach. Protests have proven to be effective vehicles for expressing dissatisfaction and demanding change, even under authoritarian regimes. Since 2011, all countries in the region have experienced moderate or significant unrest, although the consequences of these events have differed, as has the government response (Haas 2019; Cordesman 2020; Blaydes, Hamzawy and Sallam 2022). In some states, authoritarian governments felt compelled to repress or suppress protests because of their potential to reduce the (admittedly limited) legitimacy of the regime. In others (motivated by the same concerns), leaders adapted political institutions to ensure that they could protect themselves against future uprisings.

In 2022 and 2023, Iran and Israel were notable for the severity of social unrest. In Iran, protests were sparked by the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini while

in police custody. These demonstrations, which persisted for over six months despite severe government crackdowns, symbolize a deeper societal desire for freedom and equality. The movement has revealed the power of public protest as a tool for democratic expression, even in authoritarian contexts, and underscores the importance of public engagement in demanding accountability and pushing for reforms. Meanwhile, in Israel, protests erupted in response to proposed 'legal reform' aimed at weakening the Supreme Court. This reform, perceived as an attempt to impose a nationalistic agenda and undermine liberal values, has deepened societal divisions. As the government rushes legislation through amid escalating protests, Israel risks a constitutional crisis, potential economic damage and increased Palestinian violence.

In Jordan, public demonstrations have become a prominent form of expression and resistance. The successful repudiation of an unfavourable draft tax reform in 2018 (Schiffer 2018; Ryan 2022) set a precedent for using protests as a tool to voice public discontent. Protests have escalated recently due to worsening living conditions and perceived corruption (Al-Khalidi 2022). In late 2022, rising fuel prices intensified a cost-of-living crisis, sparking anti-government protests. The government responded with force, Internet disruptions and a ban on TikTok, as a way of suppressing political speech, which has raised concerns about freedom of expression and peaceful assembly.

However, it is important to note that, while protests can spotlight societal issues, they alone are not sufficient. Other factors, such as functioning state institutions, the rule of law and a regime's willingness to engage in dialogue and reform, are crucial for positive change. Therefore, to advance democracy in Western Asia, it is imperative to pair protest with other democratic mechanisms and institutions. A holistic approach is required to overcome these limitations and effect lasting change.

Western Asia is more authoritarian today than it was prior to the Arab Uprisings.

3.4. CONCLUSION

Western Asia is more authoritarian today than it was prior to the Arab Uprisings, due largely to the personalized centralization of power by post-2011 regimes and innovative repressive mechanisms aimed at preserving the status quo. Authoritarianism has expanded due to institutionalized coercion and CI capture, aided by top-down reforms. In addition to unchecked executive powers, authoritarianism has thrived as leaders use divisive strategies, manipulating ethno-sectarian and religious cleavages in society to depoliticize the citizenry, weakening civil society and opposition. Despite enhanced authoritarian practices, social resistance continues to exist. The Arab Uprisings remain 'unfinished business' as people's frustrations and democratic aspirations have only grown stronger (Maboudi 2022). While unsuccessful in generating substantial governance reforms, the transformative potential of these movements should be fostered (Muasher 2018).

Chapter 4

AMERICAS

Key findings

- There has been a continuing decline in democratic principles throughout the Americas. More countries are now low-performing in all categories of democratic performance than five years ago, albeit that a majority continue to perform in the mid-range.
- Haiti, Nicaragua and Venezuela have shown the most significant declines. But there have also been recent and rapid falls in performance in El Salvador and Guatemala.
- In some Central and South American countries, including Chile, Ecuador, El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico and Peru, leaders have resorted to increased militarization and 'states of exception' as a way to address violent crime, with negative knock-on effects on the performance of Rights and Rule of Law categories. This has particularly affected Civil Liberties, and Personal Integrity and Security.
- Suppression of the press, of freedom of expression, and of freedom of association and assembly are all worsening. In 2022, 10 countries in the Americas region experienced notable declines in Freedom of Expression, Freedom of the Press, or Freedom of Association and Assembly; in 2017, the number was seven countries.
- The Americas performed strongly in Representation, with 78 per cent of countries registering high performance for Elected Government, which measures the extent to which national, governing offices are filled through elections.

4.1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last five years, while most countries in the Americas have continued to perform in the mid-range across the four main categories of democracy (Figure 4.1), the region has experienced greater democratic contraction than expansion. The number of low-performing countries increased, and more countries experienced significant declines than experienced advances in Representation, Rights, Rule of Law and Participation (six countries declined and only three advanced).

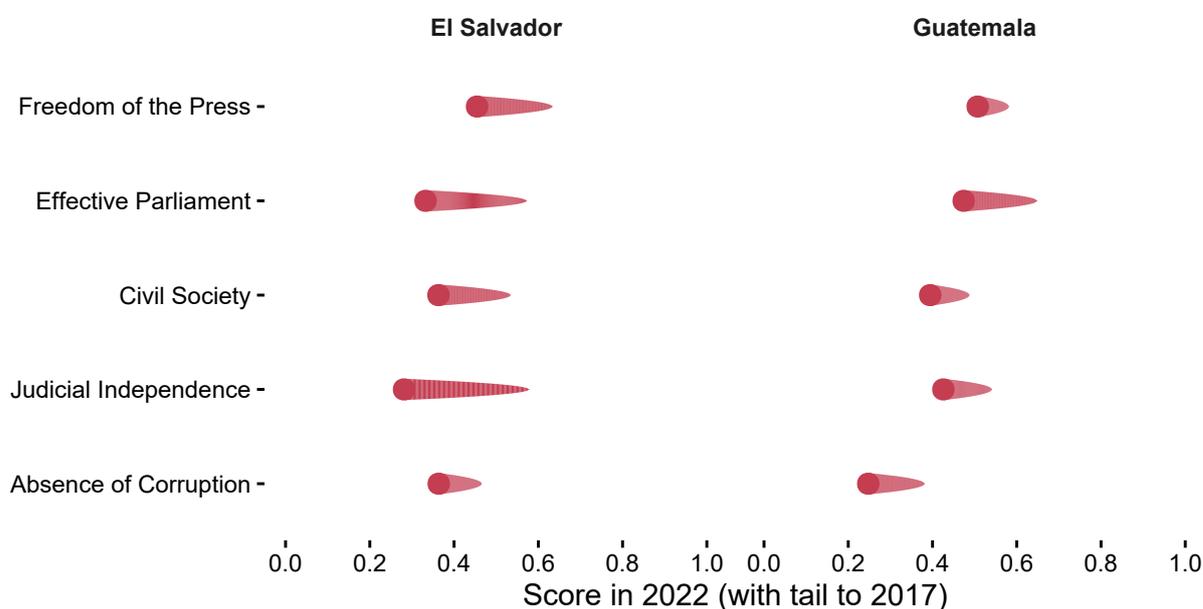
In recent years, elected leaders in the Americas have eroded democracy, with state institutions being used to legitimize restrictions on rights, civic space and electoral competition. In a region where civic engagement has been critical

Figure 4.1. Performance in the Americas is mostly mid-range (distribution of scores in GSoD categories in the Americas 2018–2022)



Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

Figure 4.2. El Salvador and Guatemala have experienced broad declines (selected factors)



Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

to enact change, restrictions on civil society participation are particularly worrying. This is the case in countries, such as Guatemala and El Salvador, where the democratic performance is mostly mid-range and low.

As shown in Figure 4.2, the breadth of declines in El Salvador and Guatemala have a particular impact on the work of countervailing institutions, which can be evidenced by executive harassment and prosecution of anti-corruption officials, media and civil society ([Maldonado 2023](#); [El País 2023a](#); [OHCHR 2023a](#)). Most recently, decisions by Guatemalan courts and prosecutors prior to and following the presidential race's first-round electoral results were criticized by experts as unwarranted and possible electoral interference ([Abbott 2023a, 2023b](#)).

4.2. THE STATE OF DEMOCRACY IN THE AMERICAS

4.2.1. Representation

Most countries in the Americas score strongly in Representation, with 13 countries featuring among the top 50 in the world. Chile (ranked at 4), Uruguay (9) and Costa Rica (13) rank in the top 20 globally. In the last five years, however, only Ecuador (53) has seen advances in its Representation scores. Nevertheless, political violence, accusations of corruption and the president's recent dissolution of Congress will likely impact Ecuador's score in the years to come ([Mella 2023](#); [Rico 2023](#)).

El Salvador (95), Guyana (87) and Haiti (157) have experienced significant declines in Representation, with the first dropping six places in the rankings in one year. Declines in Credible Elections have also occurred in high-performing countries that rank in the top 50 of Representation, such as Brazil (45) and Costa Rica (13).

In the case of Brazil, although electoral authorities proved resilient and provided certainty during the 2022 general elections, a contentious campaign and toxic polarization culminated in riotous protests in January 2023. Supporters of defeated President Jair Bolsonaro claimed election fraud, arguably because of their candidate's refusal to concede ([Nicas 2023a](#)) ([see also the case study on Brazil](#)).

The introduction of the so-called 'Plan B' electoral reform of Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador—which, among other issues, would have cut funding for the national electoral body—has also tested the resilience of CIs and their role as guarantors of credible elections. The country's Supreme Court struck it down due to significant irregularities during the legislative process ([Raziel 2023](#)).

In the USA, reports of harassment of election officials in the weeks prior to the mid-term elections point to the risks that polarized campaigns can bring ([see also the case study on the USA](#)).

Peru, despite its relatively stable scores, has suffered a crisis of representation and political parties, with the attempted self-coup by former President Pedro Castillo a standout. Public disapproval rates of both the government (at 80 per cent) and parliament (91 per cent) ([IEP 2023](#)) are extremely high, as is the public perception that the country is not governed for the benefit of citizens (86 per cent) ([Latinobarómetro 2021](#)). Overall, 91 per cent of people are not satisfied with their democracy in Peru ([Latinobarómetro 2023](#)).

In the Americas, weariness over continued economic volatility and corruption scandals have resulted in distrust of political elites and dissatisfaction with representative democratic institutions, particularly political parties and parliaments.

In 2023, only 48 per cent of people in Latin America said that they support democracy ([Latinobarómetro 2023](#)). Dissatisfaction has contributed to the rise of populist leaders, and fragmented and polarized political systems that aim to respond to discontent but have failed to maintain democracy ([Casas-Zamora 2023](#); [Latinobarómetro 2021](#)).

4.2.2. Rights

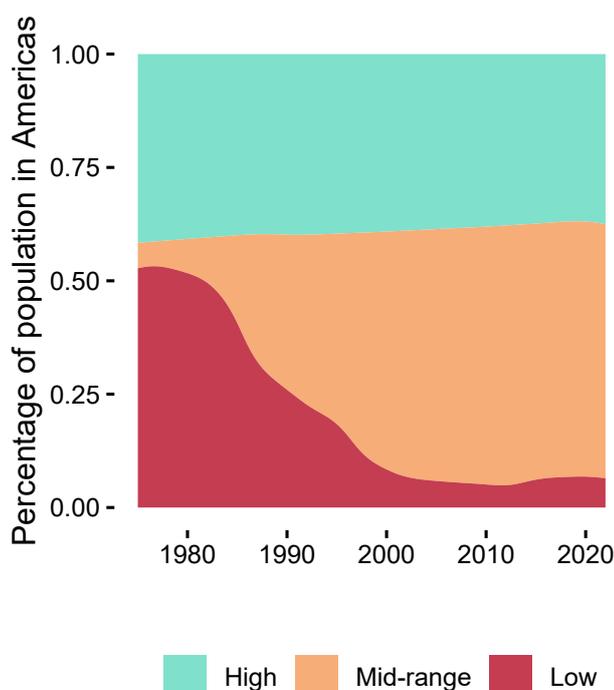
As seen in Figures 4.3, 4.4 and 4.5, performance in the Rights category remains largely in the mid-range. In total, 15 out of the 27 countries in the Americas are in the mid-range, with half of the region performing below the global average.

Nicaragua is the only country to have experienced notable declines in the Rights category overall. This is due to President Daniel Ortega's government cracking down on opposition and dissent, including retaliation against members of the Catholic Church and the media. The expulsion and arbitrary deprivation of nationality of hundreds of Nicaraguans highlights the extent of the human rights crisis in the country (OHCHR 2023d; Chamorro 2023), which is currently the lowest ranking country from the region in this category (ranked at 164).

Over the last five years, the most significant and widespread declines in the Rights category have occurred in Civil Liberties, including Freedom of Expression (six countries declined), Freedom of the Press (seven countries declined) and Freedom of Association and Assembly (five countries declined). The use of force against demonstrators in Cuba (Amnesty International 2022) and the harassment, intimidation and closure of news outlets and journalists in Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua (Méndez Dardón and Silva Ávalos 2022) exemplify this worrying trend.

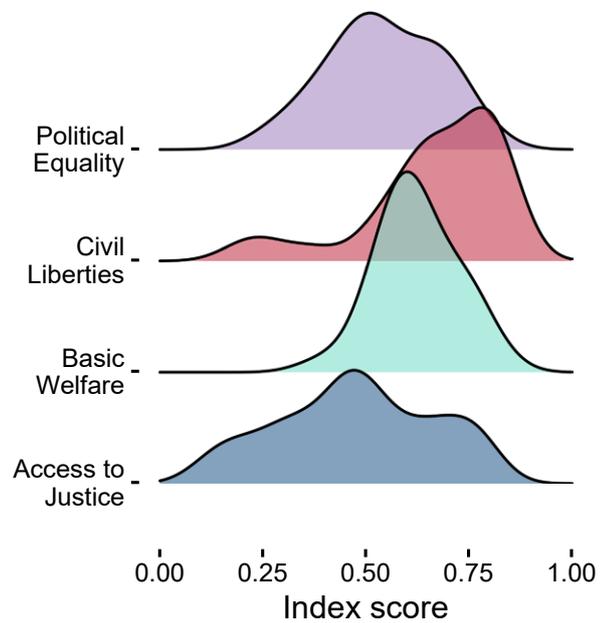
Social Group Equality is another area where democratic contraction has been notable (Figure 4.6), as Latin America and the Caribbean continues to

Figure 4.3. Performance in Rights, countries by percentage of regional population



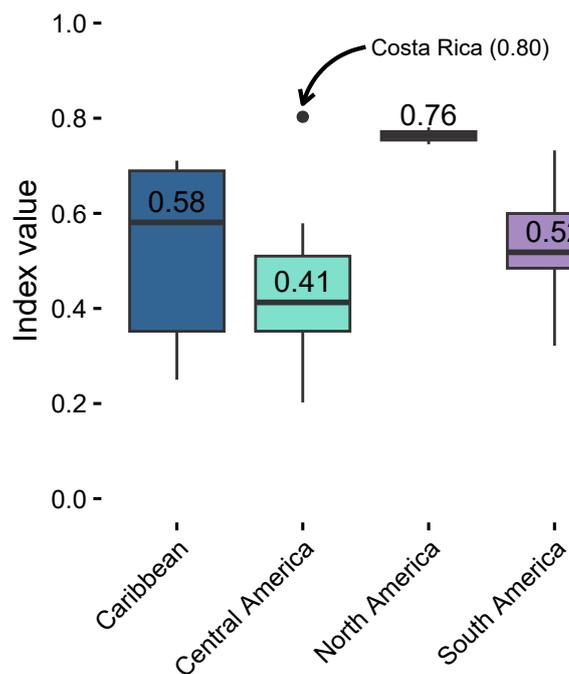
Sources: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023; United Nations Population Division, World Population Prospects: 2022 Revision.

Figure 4.4. Distribution of Rights performance across factors in the Americas, 2022



Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

Figure 4.5. Distribution of Rights scores across subregions of the Americas (median scores for subregions annotated)



Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

underperform in inequality measurements in comparison with the rest of the world (Arreaza Coll 2023).

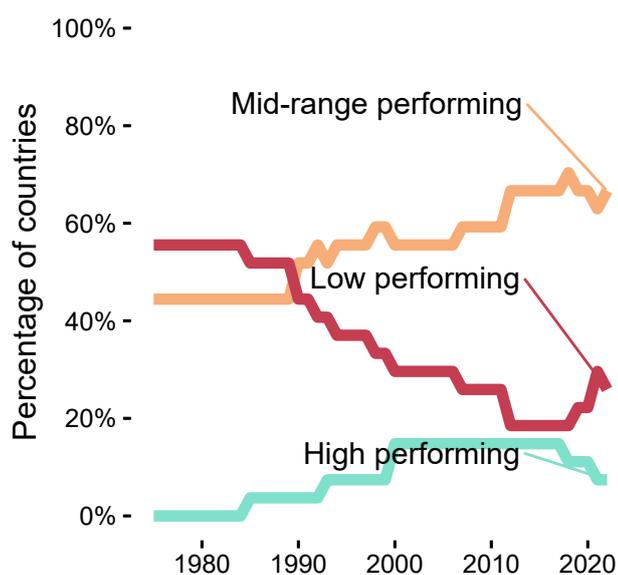
In the last five years, seven countries experienced significant declines in Social Group Equality, including high performers such as the USA (ranked at 28) and Canada (23), although they continue to rank in the top 30 countries globally in Rights.

Declines in the USA in Social Group Equality can be explained by the impact of structural racism and discrimination on political equality, alongside an array of other issues including poverty and racial profiling (OHCHR 2018b, 2022, 2023g).

Only Costa Rica (20), the highest country from the region in the rankings for Rights (Figure 4.5), and Uruguay (38), currently the sixth highest ranked country from the Americas in Rights, perform well in Social Group Equality.

The inflation-led cost-of-living crisis in the region may have exacerbated inequality. This has further fostered discontent, as observed in increasing protests in Cuba over fuel and food shortages since last year, and the 2022 protests in Panama, the largest in decades (CIVICUS 2022). Malnutrition and food insecurity have particularly affected the Caribbean and South America; these hardships, along with rising interest rates and the devaluation of

Figure 4.6. Declines in Social Group Equality have been notable in the Americas, affecting even high-performing countries



Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

currencies in countries such as Colombia, Chile and Argentina, will continue to challenge the region (Zovatto 2023).

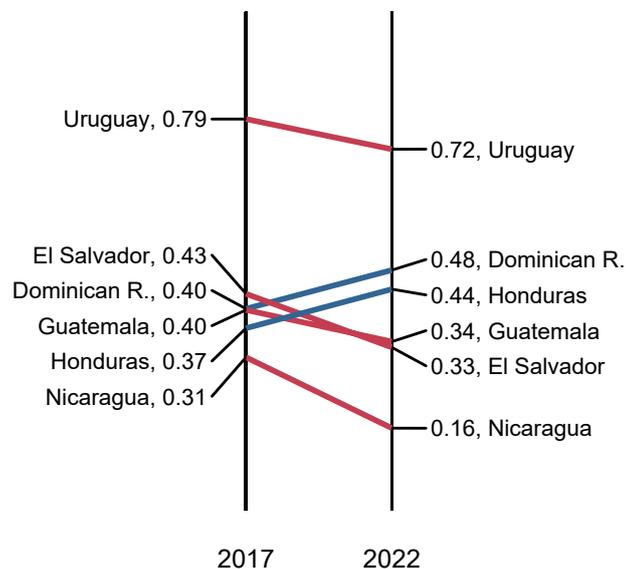
In the last five years, Gender Equality overall remained stable and no countries experienced either significant declines or improvements. Most countries perform in the mid-range in Gender Equality (18 out of the 27 countries). However, in the USA recent state-level legislation and initiatives that weaken women's rights and LGBTQIA+ rights could have an impact on the country's performance in Gender Equality (*New York Times* 2023; ACLU 2023b) (see also the case study on the USA).

4.2.3. Rule of Law

Over the last five years, several countries in the Americas have seen volatility in their Rule of Law scores (Figure 4.7). Of the 27 countries in the region, 12 perform below the global average in this category.

On the plus side, the Dominican Republic (ranked at 86) has improved at the aggregate level since 2017. But the Rule of Law category and its associated factors have seen declines in countries with institutional shortcomings, such as El Salvador and Guatemala. The mid-range performers Peru and Brazil experienced declines in Absence of Corruption and Personal Integrity and Security, respectively. High performers also experienced some declines: Uruguay in Personal Integrity and Security, and Canada in Judicial Independence, but, as they are ranked at 24 and 15 respectively, they are still the top two performers from the region in the Rule of Law category rankings (Figure 4.8).

Figure 4.7. Advances and declines in Rule of Law in the Americas comparing 2017 to 2022



Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

Figure 4.8. Rule of Law rankings in the Americas, including changes from 2021 to 2022

Country	Ranking	Change
Colombia	73	20
Honduras	101	14
Suriname	70	9
Trinidad and Tobago	40	8
Cuba	151	3
Nicaragua	165	1
Canada	15	0
Uruguay	24	0
Costa Rica	25	0
Panama	66	0
Dominican Republic	86	0
Mexico	107	0
Venezuela	173	0
Chile	27	-1
Barbados	37	-1
Haiti	158	-1
United States	29	-2
Jamaica	42	-2
Argentina	53	-2
Paraguay	102	-2
El Salvador	137	-2
Brazil	93	-4
Ecuador	82	-5
Bolivia	96	-5
Guyana	84	-9
Peru	83	-10
Guatemala	131	-10

Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

Insecurity remains a major challenge to the rule of law. Governments have failed to adequately address the root causes of increases in violent crime, and many have resorted to granting more power to the armed forces, increasing defence spending and expanding militarization in public security and migration, as well as administration of public services and parastatal entities (Manetto 2023; Barrientos 2023; Freeman and Rey 2023). This is the case in countries as diverse as Chile, Ecuador, El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico and Peru (Flores-Macias and Zarkin 2021; Amnesty International 2023).

Fatigue from long-standing problems of insecurity, corruption and economic exclusion, as well as polarizing rhetoric embraced by certain leaders, has contributed to some support for undemocratic governance at the expense of the rule of law, rights, and checks and balances. This approach has been followed by countries that face widespread security challenges.

El Salvador's President Nayib Bukele remains one of the most popular Latin American leaders, despite the incarceration of tens of thousands of people and due process violations, undertaken as part of his government's strategy against gangs (Kitroeff 2023).

Leaders from diverse political affiliations but with common security challenges, such as Presidents Xiomara Castro in Honduras, Dina Boluarte in Peru and Guillermo Lasso in Ecuador, as well as Prime Minister Andrew Holness in Jamaica, have also turned to deploying the military and to suspending rights while trying to counter crime or control migration (WOLA 2022; Cañizares 2023; Amnesty International 2023; Chappell and Ellsworth 2022). Such actions enable them to disregard the immediate oversight of formal CIs.

In the USA, Personal Integrity and Security has been affected by the increase in gun violence. Recent incidents, which include shootings that occurred because people mistakenly knocked on the wrong door or drove into the wrong

Participation is a bright spot in the Americas, with most countries performing above the global average.

driveway, mark a context in which ‘missteps’ can lead to death (Healy et al. 2023).

4.2.4. Participation

Participation is a bright spot in the Americas, with most countries performing above the global average, including five ranking in the top 20: Uruguay (ranked at 8), United States (12), Costa Rica (15), Canada (17) and Argentina (18).

Improvement was notable in the Dominican Republic (31), which moved up 11 positions, due partly to the creation and implementation of new mechanisms for participation and dialogue with national stakeholders (Presidencia de la Republica Dominicana 2021). In Mexico, popular mobilization against reforms to the electoral framework strengthened the defence of the National Electoral Institute (Instituto Nacional Electoral, INE), as citizens backed efforts to halt the reforms.

However, shrinking civic space, both online and offline (OHCHR 2023f), has limited the ability of organized civil society and activists to function as CIs in the Americas. In Brazil, El Salvador, Mexico and Peru, harassment, spyware and other forms of surveillance threaten the work of activists (Muñoz 2023). In Nicaragua, any form of dissent has been effectively criminalized and punished with unprecedented cruelty (Chamorro 2023), including through the arbitrary deprivation of nationality. Physical violence and intimidation of human rights defenders in Colombia, Honduras and Mexico have had a chilling effect on activists (OHCHR 2018a, 2019, 2023b). In El Salvador, CSOs that document human rights violations have been catalogued by the government as defenders of gangs (HRW 2022).

These developments take place in a broader context marked by extreme levels of political polarization, underpinned by historical and pervasive inequality, as well as intersecting forms of discrimination that can be traced to the foundation of democracies in the Americas (Del Aguila 2023). Latin America and the Caribbean’s levels of political polarization increased the most over the last 20 years (UNDP 2023). In the United States, entrenched disagreements over partisan lines contribute to a culture of mistrust (Mounk 2022; McCoy and Press 2022). And both fragmentation of traditional party systems and new, algorithm-driven, personalized information streams have contributed to citizens’ increasingly polarized views (Barrett, Hendrix and Sims 2021).

4.3. COUNTERVAILING INSTITUTIONS IN THE AMERICAS

CIs have taken many forms throughout the continent. The history of military dictatorships, as well as the political instability deriving from social unrest, conflict and paramilitary confrontations, has influenced regional priorities (Perina 2012) such that several democratizing countries have used their constitutional frameworks to provide strong traditional checks and balances

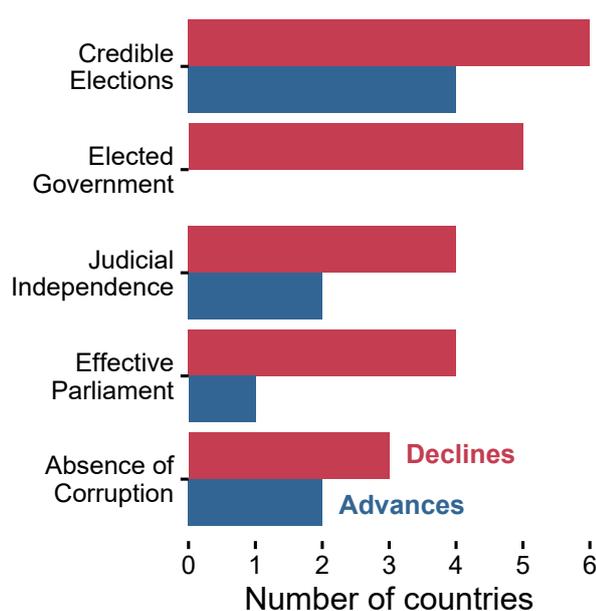
between branches of government, and other fourth-branch institutions (Uprimny 2011).

Throughout the continent, regional and national protections for independent media and civil society have been progressively implemented, in acknowledgement of their ability to foster social change and constrain government excesses. In this sense, traditional checks and balances and other formal and informal CIs have played a substantial role in supporting democracy in the region. However, in the last five years, performance in the GSoD factors relating to CIs has tilted more towards contraction than growth (Figure 4.9).

4.3.1. Supranational institutions as countervailing institutions

The inter-American human rights system has played an important role as a CI in the region by monitoring and promoting accountability for rights violations through its Commission, Court and rapporteurs. The regional Court's rulings contributed to post-military transitional justice processes in Latin America, such as in the establishment of truth commissions after it was determined that amnesty laws were incompatible with the American Convention on Human Rights (Inter-American Court of Human Rights 2001, 2012; Inter-American Commission on Human Rights 2021). More recent examples include decisions on the incompatibility with the American Convention on Human Rights of mandatory death sentences in murder cases in Trinidad and Tobago, and the

Figure 4.9. Number of countries with significant advances and declines in factors relating to CIs in 2022 (compared with 2017)



Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

incompatibility with human rights of mandatory pre-trial detention in Mexico ([Inter-American Court of Human Rights 2022, 2023](#)). This makes the regional court a significant CI with the ability to ensure respect for rights.

Also at the regional level, the Organization of American States (OAS) has made important contributions to the promotion of democracy through electoral observation missions and the adoption of the Inter-American Democratic Charter. Enforceability issues and persistent non-compliance by some countries that have opted to withdraw from multilateral diplomacy, however, point to a need to strengthen regional capacity to facilitate more consistent and regular follow-up for countries that are experiencing challenges. This approach is preferable to the use of the Inter-American Democratic Charter as a last-ditch effort to respond to democratic breakdown ([International IDEA 2021](#)). Regional experts have also proposed measures to increase the Charter's efficiency, such as enabling the judiciary and legislative branches or even EMBs and civil society to request the OAS measures or field visits, and strengthening the Charter as an early-warning tool ([Zovatto 2021](#); [Mariani 2011](#)).

4.3.2. Domestic institutions as countervailing institutions

Parliaments

Legislatures in the Americas have had mixed success in exercising oversight. In the USA, the US House Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol (January 6th Committee) recommended that former President Donald Trump be charged with federal crimes for his participation in attempts to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential elections ([Gardner, Helderman and Alemany 2022](#); [January 6th Committee 2022](#)). Although the findings were not binding on the Justice Department, the indictment in August 2023 of the former president on federal charges refers substantially to the Committee's report and the evidence and testimony presented before it ([Jurecic](#)). Partisan divide, and a shift in the composition of the US Congress after the 2022 mid-term elections, will also likely have an impact on the role of the legislature as a CI.

In Mexico, a Congress aligned mostly with the ruling party has paralysed the appointment of officials to oversight bodies that have been criticized by the executive ([González 2023](#)). It has also facilitated the fast-track adoption of legislative initiatives proposed by the president ([Saldierna and Becerril 2023](#)). Courts have had to act as a CI, considering accusations of legislative process violations or bills in opposition to the Constitution. This was the case with the decree by which the National Guard's operation and administration had been placed under military command; it was invalidated after constitutional challenges ([Suprema Corte de Justicia 2023](#)).

The effectiveness of parliaments has also been weak (Figure 4.10), or come at the expense of stability, in contexts where the executive and parliament are led by opposing parties. This is particularly the case where the fragmentation of the political class and the proliferation of non-traditional parties requires

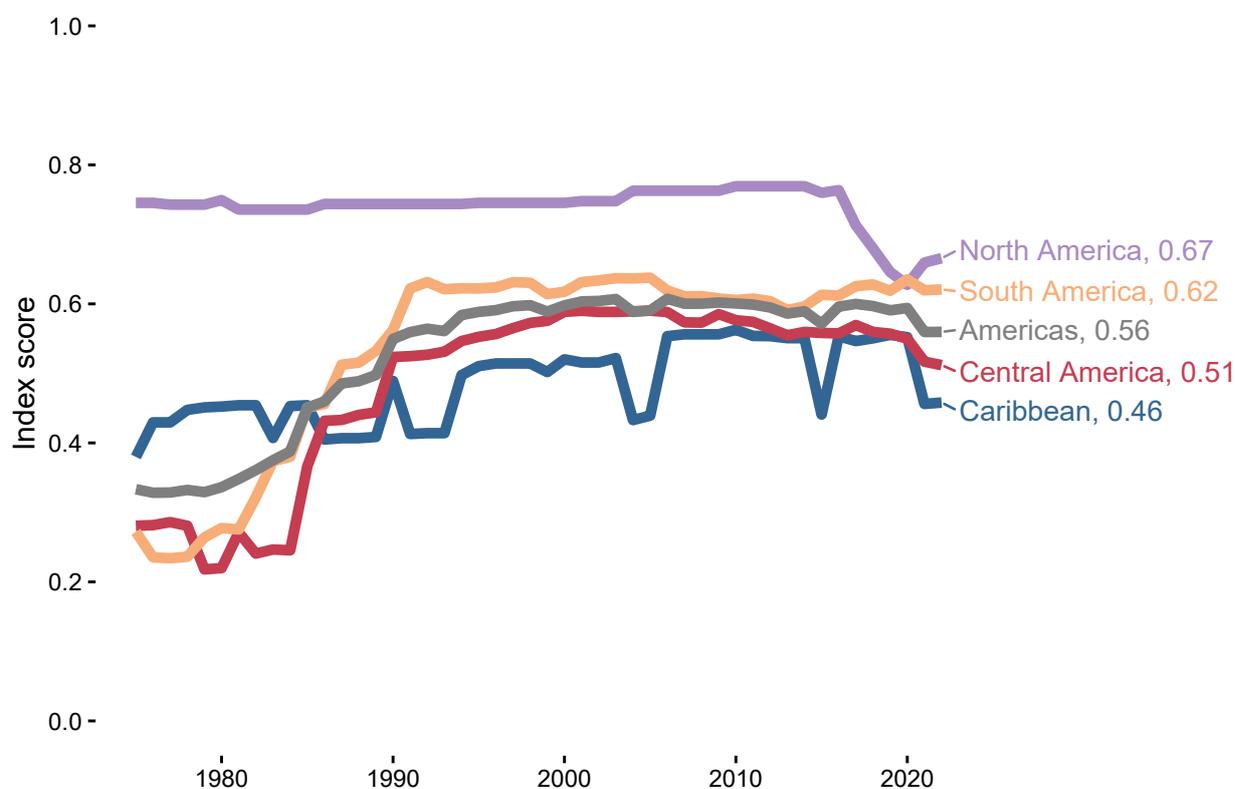
leaders to either seek compromises to advance their priorities or risk confrontation (Freeman 2022).

In Peru, confrontation between branches of government included threats of impeachment even before former President Pedro Castillo took office (Del Aguila n.d.). The executive and legislative branches have distorted the use of balance of power mechanisms established in the Constitution, introducing high instability into the Peruvian political system and leading to a high turnover of leaders; in five years, the country has had six presidents. These mechanisms include provisions through which a presidential vacancy can be declared, on account of vaguely defined 'moral incompetence', and the executive can dissolve Congress if the legislature refuses approval of two proposals of councils of ministers.

Judiciaries

Courts have been somewhat more successful in keeping leaderships in check across the Americas, especially in countries where judicial independence is strong.

Figure 4.10. Trends in Effective Parliament in the subregions of the Americas



Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

In Costa Rica, the judiciary determined that the government had indirectly violated the freedom of the press by ordering the closure of an entertainment centre belonging to the same corporation as a newspaper critical of President Rodrigo Chaves Robles, a decision that has an impact on freedom of speech and media integrity ([Benavides-Santos 2022](#); [Sociedad Interamericana de Prensa 2022](#)).

Mexico's top court has issued relevant rulings to halt initiatives that further military power ([OHCHR 2023e](#)), despite confrontational rhetoric from the executive. It also invalidated the legal electoral reform presented by the President and passed by a Congress in which the ruling party is in the majority ('Plan B'), due to serious violations of the legislative process ([Raziel 2023](#)).

In the USA, upcoming federal and state courts' consideration of criminal charges and civil claims against former President Trump demonstrate their ability to act as a CI with regard to high-ranking officials.

In Brazil, judicial oversight of the elections was critical to containing misinformation in the midst of a polarized presidential campaign, although not without criticism for possible overreach ([Galarraga-Gortazar 2022](#); [Nicas 2023b](#)).

Conversely, in countries with low performance in Judicial Independence and Predictable Enforcement, as well as with subservient courts, judiciaries have been inefficient as CIs. In Nicaragua, the judiciary has been 'weaponized' to crack down on dissidence through reprisals against political opposition, critics and their families ([OHCHR 2023c](#)).

Fourth-branch institutions, national human rights institutions, EMBs and elections

Independent and regulatory CIs also play an important role in checking power. These include fourth-branch institutions, such as electoral commissions, national human rights institutions (NHRIs) and the press, and other informal CIs like CSOs and social movements. With varying degrees of autonomy and independence, NHRIs monitor compliance with human rights, keeping the executive branch of government in check. For example, Honduras's NHRI monitors the government's use of emergency powers to contain extortion ([CONADEH 2023](#)).

EMBs have also played a major role in ensuring credible elections. Mexico's INE stood its ground in defending its autonomy in the midst of a contentious electoral reform process, including by challenging the proposal's constitutionality before the Supreme Court ([INE 2023](#)).

Elections have also proved to be effective CIs in the region by allowing citizens to express their dissatisfaction with ruling parties through the so-called vote of punishment. In democratic elections held in the last few years, the vast majority (14 out of 15) resulted in an opposition victory ([Sahd, Zovatto and Rojas 2023](#)). The frequent use of run off elections in the region, in which the

reversal of first-round results is not uncommon (Zovatto 2022), further points to the ability of citizens to check power and reconsider their political options, demonstrated through their voting. However, the efficiency of elections as a CI is directly related to a country's performance in Representation.

A 'super-cycle' of presidential elections in Latin America, with the potential to reconfigure the region's political landscape, has been in development since 2021 and will end in 2024 (Zovatto 2023). In 2023, Paraguay's presidential election stood out, as the ruling party maintained power, a shift from a recent trend in Latin America where both anti-system candidates and the appeal of political alternation had gained traction (Romero Ballivián 2023).

However, some fourth-branch institutions have not been as successful in maintaining public trust. In Guatemala, the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (Tribunal Supremo Electoral, TSE), a body established with constitutional autonomy, has been criticized for applying unequal standards, to the detriment of the opposition, throughout the 2023 electoral process (WOLA 2023; DW 2023).

Civil society, social movements and the press

With regard to other informal CIs, in Barbados, CSOs were key to challenging discriminatory legislation that criminalized same-sex relations. Their activism resulted in a favourable High Court ruling that struck down such provisions (González Cabrera 2022). CSOs and other activists have spearheaded the push for reproductive rights throughout the continent (Belski 2022; ACLU 2023a). In Chile, the social movement that started in 2019 has been key to the constitutional process still under way (Montes 2022). In Mexico, demonstrations against the government's proposals to change the electoral law through the 'Plan B' reform signalled to political actors the public's rejection of measures that could result in the weakening of the EMB. Further, journalism has helped to bring attention to questions of impartiality, prompting calls for an ethics code in the USA's highest court (Kaplan, Elliott and Mierjeski 2023).

4.4. CONCLUSION

Formal domestic and supranational CIs have contributed to the maintenance of balance of power and relative stability in the Americas. Yet they have not acted alone in checking excesses of authority or demanding accountability. Cases where the success of formal CIs has only been partial or insufficient demonstrate the need to strengthen the region's civic space through adequate legal and institutional frameworks.

The region has benefited from the interplay between formal and fourth-branch institutions, and the future of democracy will depend partly on support for even more cross-institutional cooperation and dialogue.

Formal domestic and supranational CIs have contributed to the maintenance of balance of power and relative stability in the Americas.

Box 4.1. The 2023 Guatemalan elections¹

The 2023 presidential election in Guatemala was decided in a run-off between Sandra Torres, a former first lady considered an establishment conservative politician, and Bernardo Arévalo, an unexpected contender and former diplomat who came in second place after the first-round election on 25 June. Strikingly, in the first round, nearly a fourth of voters did not support any candidate: 17.38 per cent of ballots were spoiled—more than the ballots cast in support of the then-leading candidate (15.86 per cent), and an additional 7 per cent of voters left their ballots blank.

The Constitutional Court's suspension of the certification of the first-round electoral results pending the review of ballots, in early July, fuelled concern over the integrity of the presidential election; critics claimed that the measure was unprecedented and unwarranted (Abbot 2023a). After the confirmation by the TSE that Arévalo and Torres would face each other in a run-off, and upon the request of the Attorney General's Office, a lower criminal court ordered the suspension of Arévalo's Movimiento Semilla party, and warrants were granted to carry out a search on the party's headquarters as part of an investigation into the legality of the party's registration. These actions, along with searches by prosecutors of the offices of the TSE and other authorities, sparked serious consternation from international actors and observers (Vílchez 2023; OHCHR 2023h).

Arévalo won the 20 August run-off election, with a difference of over 20 percentage points. The election served as the ultimate CI and an indication of citizens' rejection of politics-as-usual and fatigue with the perception of authorities' indolence in combating corruption and impunity and addressing insecurity. Notably, only 23 per cent of the population were satisfied with their democracy (Latinobarómetro 2023). Arévalo had campaigned on a progressive and anti-corruption platform and citizens carried out protests demanding respect for the electoral process; many view Arévalo's—

and Semilla's—victory as a new 'democratic spring', a term widely used in 2015 when popular anti-corruption protests contributed to the party's creation (Romero and Garcia 2023; *El País* 2023b; Abbott 2023b; Exil 2023; Arroyo and Boche Ventura 2023).

While the TSE certified Arévalo's win in the presidential election, prosecutorial actions against his Semilla party are still ongoing. In late August, the Citizen Registrar's Office issued a resolution provisionally suspending Movimiento Semilla's legal personality—despite the fact that the Registrar's Office had initially refused to comply with a criminal judge's order, as it considered the latter had overstepped its authority (Boche Ventura 2023a; Exil 2023).

The party appealed and the TSE has halted the Registrar's resolution suspending Semilla. Experts say that, while the TSE has confirmed Semilla's legal personality (given that the legal framework states that a party's registration cannot be revoked during an electoral process), as of early September, it did not issue any judgement on whether, once the electoral process has concluded on 31 October, a criminal judge could have the authority to order its suspension (Boche Ventura 2023c).

Arévalo has characterized the measures against his party as an attempted 'coup' to prevent him from taking office in January 2024 (Suárez Jaramillo 2023). An outpouring of support for the President-elect took place in early September 2023, when protesters also demanded the resignation of the Attorney General, an anti-graft prosecutor and the lower-court judge who had participated in the suspension of the Semilla party.

If Movimiento Semilla's registration as a political party were permanently cancelled, it would weaken Arévalo's support in Congress; Semilla's elected legislators would be prevented from participating in Congress leadership and commissions (Boche Ventura 2023b).

¹ Box 4.1 on the 2023 Guatemalan elections was last updated on 8 September 2023.

In some countries of the Americas, geopolitical developments could affect compliance with the rule of law. Brazil's renewed relations with Venezuela, despite the human rights and humanitarian crises in the latter, have been heavily criticized ([Canineu and Ragozzino 2023](#)), including by other countries in the region, such as Chile and Uruguay ([BBC News Mundo 2023](#)). International pressure is also key to ensuring that next year's elections in Venezuela can be held in credible conditions. Russian aid in the form of military supplies to Nicaragua could further embolden the Central American country to keep up its stance of ignoring regional dialogue ([Infobae 2023](#)). In this sense, regional dialogue and diplomacy will be key to containing authoritarian gains.



Chapter 5

ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

Key findings

- The broad democratic decline witnessed in the region in recent years has mostly come to a halt. However, factors of Civil Liberties, such as Freedom of Expression, and Freedom of Association and Assembly, largely continued their multi-year downward trend across the region.
- After peaking in 2012, the region's aggregate Freedom of the Press score has now reverted to 2001 levels. Significant declines have occurred in countries as varied as Australia, Kyrgyzstan, the Philippines, South Korea, Sri Lanka and Taiwan.
- While the broad democratic decline has ended, there has not been a turnaround. Most countries in the region remain below the global average in every category other than Participation, although significant improvements in Rule of Law (Maldives, Taiwan and Uzbekistan) and Representation (Malaysia, Maldives and Thailand) are promising.
- Across the region, ineffective parliaments and crackdowns on organized civil society have left the judiciary, anti-corruption commissions and at times mass street protests as the key countervailing institutions.

5.1. INTRODUCTION

After several years of across-the-board declines, coinciding with the Covid-19 pandemic, both five-year and one-year trends now paint a picture of institutional stability across the Asia and the Pacific region. There are notable exceptions in Myanmar and Afghanistan, two states that have seen steep declines across all categories of measurement due to civil war and state collapse. Without those two states, however, the aggregate regional score in three of the four categories (Representation, Rights and Rule of Law) improved by a very small margin from 2021 to 2022.

These changes are small enough that no firm conclusions should be drawn about a potential democratic breakthrough or renewal, and several more years of data collection will be necessary before either continued stability, or possible future improvements, will be clearly observable.

It is also important not to confuse the possible temporary halt in democratic decline with an improvement: most countries in the region continue to score below the global average in Rule of Law, Rights and Representation.

The relative stability can be seen in Figure 5.1, in which states are coded according to the net total of advancing or declining factor scores between 2017 and 2022 (the number of factors with a negative five-year change subtracted from the number of factors with a positive change over the same time period). Most states in the region—23 out of 35—saw a net advance or decline of, at most, only one factor.

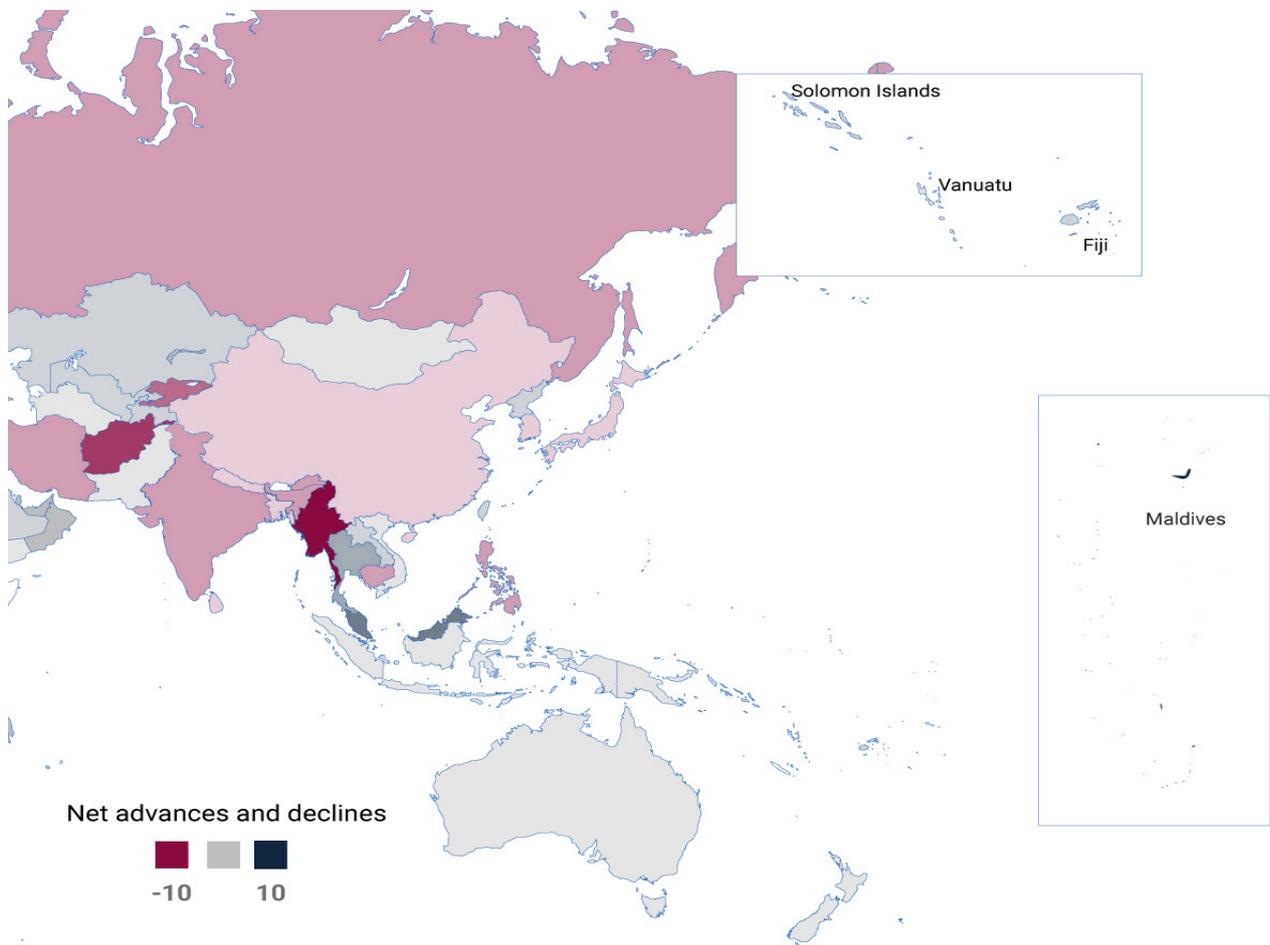
Historically high-performing countries like Australia, Japan and South Korea still perform at similar levels across the GSoD Indices. Entrenched authoritarian regimes in Laos (146 in Rights and Representation) and China (134 and 157 in the same categories, respectively) continue to be free of any indications of significant change, despite the outbreak of protests on a historic scale across the latter in late 2022 ([HRW 2023](#)). Asia's democracies—and would-be aspiring democratizers in the region's more authoritarian states—still face exogenous and endogenous challenges, both towards revitalizing institutions and in preventing further democratic decline.

5.2. THE STATE OF DEMOCRACY IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

5.2.1. Representation

Malaysia and Maldives made significant advances in Representation in the last five years; the former as a result of improvements in Credible Elections and Free Political Parties, and the latter Effective Parliament, Credible Elections, Elected Government and Free Political Parties. Malaysia (ranked at 92) rose 17 places in the rankings for Representation on 2021, and Maldives (83) three places. Afghanistan, Cambodia, India and the Philippines saw significant

Figure 5.1. There has been overall stability in democratic performance across Asia and the Pacific between 2017 and 2022



Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

declines in Credible Elections scores over five years, while Malaysia, Maldives, Sri Lanka and Thailand saw advances over the same time span.

Malaysia's improvement can be credited in part to the convincing defeat of the long-powerful United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) in November 2022 elections, which had clung to power in the face of persistent and wide-ranging corruption allegations (BERSIH 2022; Lee n.d.; Wee 2022).

India, which the UN estimates overtook China as the world's most populous country in April 2023, continues to perform at the mid-range level in Representation, despite a statistically significant five-year decline, as well as similar declines in Credible Elections and Free Political Parties (UN DESA

2023). Concerns were raised about how the ruling party benefited from unequal treatment by Facebook and used hate speech in the 2019 election (Purnell and Horwitz 2020; Safi 2019; Tiwary 2022; Chakrabarty 2023).

The Election Commission of India has sought to regulate and proscribe hate speech, despite lacking the specific statutory authority to do so; instead, it used provisions of the Indian Penal Code and the Representation of People Act (The Scroll 2022). The Supreme Court of India has also repeatedly intervened, including via an April 2023 order mandating all states and union territories to register occurrences of hate speech without waiting for a formal complaint to be filed (Rajagopal 2023). In August 2023, critics and opposition parties argued that proposed changes to the process of nominating members of the Election Commission risked curtailing its independence (Jain 2023; The Wire 2023).

In 2023, questions about the equal treatment of political parties continued, especially around alleged bias in a legal case that has seen the conviction of Rahul Gandhi, senior leader of the Indian National Congress, the main opposition party. Gandhi was sentenced to two years in prison for defamation in March 2023, which could have barred his participation in the 2024 elections. However, the Supreme Court stayed the conviction in August 2023 (Landrin 2023; Mathur 2023; Venkatesan 2023).

Bangladesh saw a significant decline in Elected Government stemming from the lack of improvement since the much-criticized 2018 general elections (The Wire 2018; Siddiqui and Paul 2019; HRW 2018). The next general elections are scheduled to be held in 2024, and tensions, fatal protests and arrests of leading opposition figures began as early as 2022 (see also the case study on Bangladesh) (Hasnat and Mashal 2022).

Political instability in Nepal is reflected in a five-year decline in Effective Parliament. The parliament had been dissolved by the prime minister in 2021, but political deadlock continued after it was reinstated by a court order (Bhattacharai 2021). Political coalitions have continued to be unstable since the November 2022 elections, and the government underwent seven cabinet reshuffles within its first four months in power, with analysts indicating that the primary political opposition appeared more interested in replacing the governing coalition partners than providing parliamentary oversight (ANI News 2023; Healy and Muktan 2023).

5.2.2. Rights

A continuing area of worry is Civil Liberties, where India, Maldives, the Philippines and Sri Lanka saw significant declines over five years, as did already low-performing Afghanistan and China. In the global rankings for Rights, India (ranked at 104) dropped 3 places, Maldives (98) 5 places and Sri Lanka (88) 18 places since 2021. By virtue of other countries across the world facing larger declines, the Philippines (90) improved its position in the rankings by one.

The most significant outliers, in terms of the overall pause in democratic decline, were seen in the factors Freedom of Expression, Freedom of the Press, and Freedom of Association and Assembly, which largely continued their downward trend of previous years. Asia and the Pacific's regional average for Civil Liberties is well below the world's, and most people in the region live in a country that has seen a significant five-year decline in its Civil Liberties score.

In mid-performing India, declines in Freedom of Expression and Freedom of Association and Assembly were exemplified by Amnesty International closing its doors there in 2020, citing raids on its offices and its trustees' residences and the eventual freezing of its accounts ([Amnesty International n.d.](#)).

In also mid-performing Sri Lanka, the state responded to hundreds of days of mass protests—which forced the president to resign—with the introduction of laws that restrict people's freedom of association and assembly and a constitutional amendment that has been criticized for retaining the very concentration of power in the executive that it seemingly seeks to contain ([HRW 2022b](#)). Sri Lanka's Centre for Policy Alternatives described it as 'a failure to understand the underlying public frustration in the system of governance that culminated in mass scale protests across Sri Lanka' ([CPA 2022](#)).

The declines in Freedom of the Press and Freedom of Expression (Figure 5.2) found in the GSoD Indices have taken place during rapid changes in the way media is consumed and shared. Since 2017, Internet penetration in Asia and the Pacific has risen from 48 to 64 per cent, albeit unequally distributed and reflecting pre-existing social inequalities ([ITU 2017, 2022](#); [Setiawan, Pape and Beschorner 2022](#)).

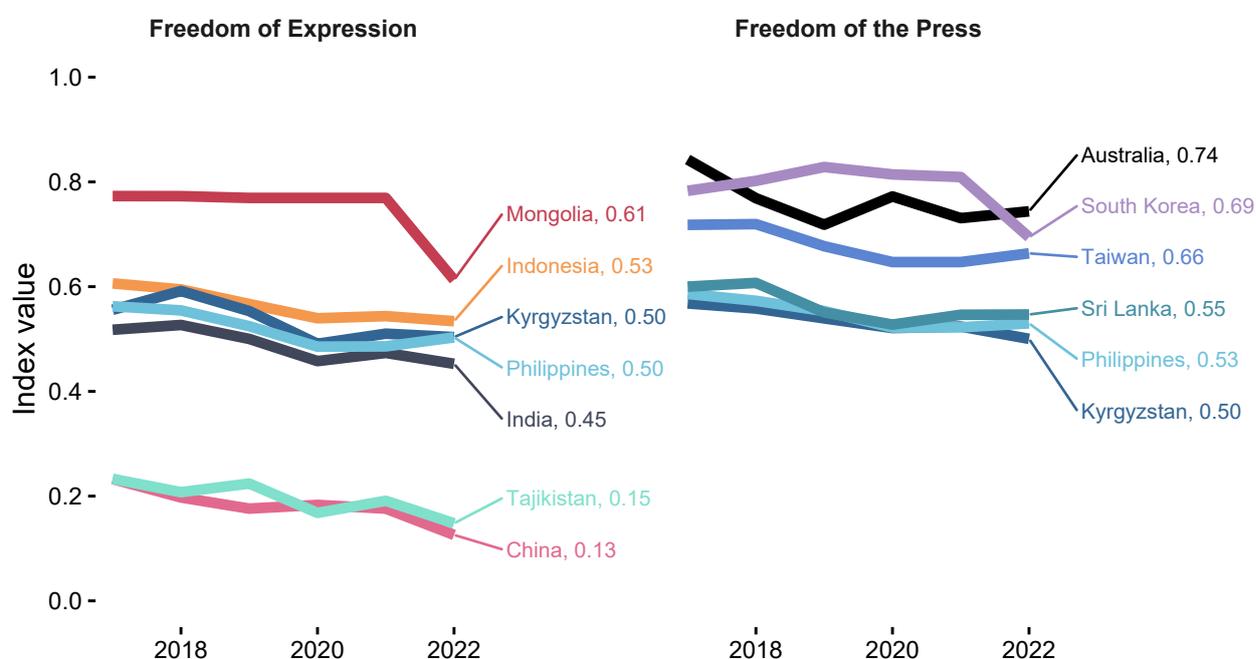
The hope in some quarters that digitalization and a levelling of media systems would drive democratic change proved to be misplaced, as newer forms of online and social media became a site of political contestation rather than a technical correction to government censorship and private US and Chinese platform monopolies ([Sinpeng 2020](#); [Farrell 2022](#)).

Instead, traditional and social media constitute a constantly changing 'smooth space' that regulators, political parties and journalists must negotiate in order to protect the core democratic CI elections ([Hubert 2019](#); [Tan 2020](#)).

Gender Equality showed limited changes across the region, with only two significant declines—in Afghanistan and Kyrgyzstan—over the last five years. Australia, New Zealand and Taiwan remain the highest-performing countries in this factor in the region, with the vast majority of other countries performing at the mid-range.

Afghanistan, Fiji, Kyrgyzstan, Myanmar and Taiwan have all experienced statistically significant declines in Social Group Equality over the last five years. Despite a long journey ahead, recent advances for LGBTQIA+ rights in the courts in Japan, Sri Lanka, Taiwan and elsewhere related to same-sex marriage

Figure 5.2. Variations in Freedom of Expression and Freedom of the Press for selected countries 2017–2022



Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

rights and decriminalizing homosexuality could potentially signal an opening for long-awaited reforms (International IDEA 2023a).

5.2.3. Rule of Law

Rule of Law scores vary widely across Asia and the Pacific, with Oceania and East Asia the highest-performing subregions and Central Asia the lowest. This category is also where the most dramatic changes have taken place over the last five years, as the modest reforms in Uzbekistan (ranked at 114) and the democratic contraction in Kyrgyzstan (117) have led the former to surpass the latter.

Weak parliaments and attacks on media have resulted in more technocratic institutions, such as anti-corruption bureaus and the judiciary, to push back against executive overreach in the region.

In East and South Asia, top courts have delivered landmark rulings expanding rights for women and LGBTQIA+ persons in the absence of parliamentary or governmental action, ranging from removing the requirement of full-sex reassignment surgery for those seeking legal gender recognition in Hong Kong (Lau 2023), to recognizing the social benefits of same-sex couples in South Korea (Yoon 2023) and legalizing abortion regardless of marital status in India (Pandey 2022).

High courts can play a crucial role in protecting free speech. In Pakistan, a colonial-era sedition law criminalizing criticism of the government was struck down in March 2023 ([Al Jazeera 2023](#)), and in the Philippines, a tax court cleared Nobel laureate Maria Ressa of four tax evasion charges widely held to be politically motivated. It was hailed as a win for press freedom and the rule of law ([OHCHR 2023a](#)).

5.2.4. Participation

With the exception of Central Asia, countries in the region typically score at mid-range or high-performing levels of Participation. The major changes are in Fiji (ranked at 50) and Maldives (93), which have seen significant improvements in Civil Society in the last five years. Taiwan (4) moved up three places in Participation over the past year and remains the highest-ranked country in the region.

Mass public participation in electoral cycles remains the most powerful countervailing force as underlined by the 2022 Malaysian and 2023 Thai elections.

After lowering the voting age from 21 to 18 years and introducing automatic voter registration, the 2022 Malaysian election saw an increased turnout of three million more voters, compared with the previous election cycle in 2018 ([Fernandez Gibaja 2022](#); [International IDEA n.d.](#)). In this case the actions of the electorate in largely removing a corruption-troubled party from power worked in complement with the nation's anti-corruption commission, a fourth-branch institution that had successfully obtained the conviction of former prime minister and UMNO president Najib Razak for corruption, for his role in the 1MDB scandal ([Latiff 2023](#)).

Thailand also saw the highest voter turnout in its history (albeit by a small margin) in May 2023 parliamentary elections and a historic win for the Move Forward Party at the expense of both the ruling conservative coalition and traditional opposition Pheu Thai Party ([International IDEA 2023b](#)). Although roundly interpreted as a rejection of the continued rule of Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha, who took power in a 2014 coup, Move Forward's path to gaining power was blocked by the military-appointed Senate. By August 2023, Move Forward leader Pita Limjaroenrat's leadership bid had failed in the face of Senate opposition, and Pheu Thai was negotiating with political parties allied with the military, in order to build a ruling coalition ([Nikkei Asia 2023](#)).

Thailand (118) has witnessed a surge in civic participation, slowly improving its ranking in Participation over the past few years, rising three places between 2021 and 2022. Youth engagement, activism and civic engagement have only intensified since the 2014 coup d'état, with anti-government protests in 2020.

Elsewhere in the region, the December 2022 Fiji election saw the peaceful removal of a long-time prime minister who had also taken power in a coup ([see also the case study on Fiji](#)). Uzbekistan (148), similarly to Thailand, has moved

up six places in Participation over the past year, partly attributed to the easing of restrictive CSO registration procedures.

While slight openings for civic engagement in both Thailand and Uzbekistan demonstrate much-needed resilience in the face of repressive environments, the continued crackdown on protests and existing legal restrictions on CSOs indicate that more needs to be done to sustain democratic change (Solod 2022; CIVICUS 2022a).

5.3. COUNTERVAILING INSTITUTIONS IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

5.3.1. Supranational institutions as countervailing institutions

Low- and middle-income nations in South East Asia and the Pacific are arguably subject to the most external pressure in the region. Despite the efforts of governments to focus international diplomatic relations on questions of development aid and assistance, they increasingly operate in a world interpreted by great powers through the lens of zero-sum and militarized competition (Kaiku 2023; Xiao 2022; Thu 2023; Needham 2022).

Australia, China and the USA are increasingly interested in strengthening and building ties with security forces in a region where military coups are often within living memory (Baldor 2023).

The lingering economic cost of the pandemic continues to put pressure on Asia and the Pacific's low- and middle-income countries, as the region is likely to experience the most significant long-term economic shock from the Covid-19 pandemic (Kothari and Tawk 2023).⁵ These countries are also under continuing pressure from rising European and US interest rates that constrain and limit public policymaking (Arteta, Kamin and Ruch 2023; Iacoviello and Navarro 2018).

According to an April 2023 Asian Development Bank report, 23 countries covered by the GSoD Indices in the region are at high or moderate risk of being unable to manage their external debt in the near future (Table 5.1). A country overburdened with debt also imposes costs on its trading partners, as funds that could have been used to import goods or invest in productive enterprises are instead set aside for debt service. This means that, while creditor nations' financial sectors benefit in the short term, their real economies suffer and the potential for systemic risk only grows (Pettis 2023).

If reversals of previous years' democratic trends are to involve delivering on the social and economic goods that underlie democratic social contracts, many

⁵ Other analyses describe Latin America and the Caribbean as the region of the world most likely to suffer the most significant shock. However, neither the IMF nor International IDEA separates out Latin America from less-affected North American nations for the purpose of this or other analyses. A further subdivision of the countries of the world could lead to a different conclusion.

Table 5.1. External debt vulnerabilities (from Asian Development Bank)

High		Moderate		Low
Lao PDR	Nepal	Bangladesh		Turkmenistan
Mongolia	Timor-Leste	Papua New Guinea		Solomon Islands
Sri Lanka	Armenia	Vanuatu		India
Maldives	Indonesia	Tonga		Viet Nam
Pakistan	Bhutan	Samoa		PRC
Georgia	Cambodia	Fiji		Azerbaijan
Tajikistan	Philippines	Thailand		
Kazakhstan	Kyrgyz Republic	Myanmar		
	Uzbekistan			

Notes: Lao PDR = Lao People's Democratic Republic; PRC = People's Republic of China; PNG = private nonguaranteed; PPG = public and publicly guaranteed.

External debt includes both public (PPG) and private (PNG) debt. They are listed in order of scores from high to low per group (top to bottom, left to right). Economies with unavailable data on liquidity indicators are excluded from the ranking.

Please note that some countries in the table are not listed in the region Asia and the Pacific in International IDEA's GSoD Indices.

Source: Table is redrawn from 'Table 3: External Debt Vulnerabilities 2022-2023—Ranking Overall', in Ferrarini, B., Dagli, S. and Mariano, P., *Sovereign Debt Vulnerabilities in Asia and the Pacific*, ADB Economics Working Paper Series No. 680 (Manilla: Asian Development Bank, 2023), <<https://doi.org/10.22617/WPS230124-2>>

countries in the region face a continuing uphill battle (Stubbs et al. 2023). Debt crises can act as an obstruction to the core CI of regularly scheduled elections, as has been the case in Pakistan and Sri Lanka (see below).

Contrary to the developing status quo of 'a more narrow and exclusive focus on maximizing the wealth and power of their state' in international relations, countries in Asia and the Pacific would be better served by strengthening regional cooperation (Helleiner 2023). Regional networks, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), could theoretically act as a stabilizing and democratizing counterweight in a world of enhanced great-power competition—although no such regional coalition has yet risen to the challenge (Damuri 2023; HRW 2022a).

Diverging member state priorities and internal tensions have revealed fractures within regional bodies such as ASEAN and PIF, which has hampered their ability to move from talk to action on pressing issues, such as Myanmar and presenting a unified front on climate change, respectively (Lawson 2022; Council on Foreign Relations 2022).

International economic fetters played a significant role in the 2023 political crisis in Pakistan, whose years of living on the verge of default amplified its vulnerability and hampered its response to 2022's climate-change-fuelled floods (Yap 2023; Runey 2023). The parliament that oversaw the removal of Imran Khan from the premiership in April 2022 proved no better at managing the country's extremely distressed finances, and the ensuing political crisis spiralled out of all actors' control by mid-2023 (Burney 2023; Joles 2023).

5.3.2. Domestic institutions as countervailing institutions

Independent media and threats to freedom of the press

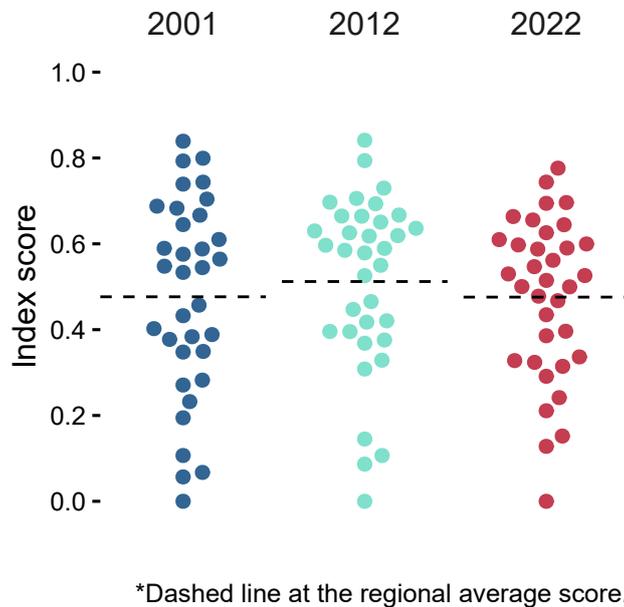
Threats to freedom of speech extend beyond chaotic online spaces of proliferating home-grown and foreign disinformation, or social media platform-facilitated intercommunal violence (Brandt et al. 2022; Purnell and Horwitz 2021). In 2022 and 2023, Bangladesh, Cambodia and Kyrgyzstan instituted outright bans on popular independent and opposition media outlets, and a Pakistani court strengthened the country's blasphemy laws (Imanaliyeva 2023; Masood 2023; OHCHR 2023b; Daily Star 2023). The South Korean Government was criticized domestically and internationally for barring a major media outlet from a travelling press pool and for cutting public broadcasting funding amid claims of political bias in its programming as it was seen as having an unfavourable disposition towards the Yoon Suk Yeol administration (CIVICUS 2022b; RSF 2022).

The slow decline in Freedom of the Press is a long-term trend, having regressed to 2001 levels since the regional average's historical peak in 2012 (Figure 5.3).

While these state and private limitations on freedom of expression and the media remain effective, the ability of the press or mass political action to play the role of a CI is likely to be limited. In less democratic regimes, mass media institutions are known to publish corruption investigations that result in the removal of high-ranking officials, but only with the government's implicit or explicit permission. The top-down liberalizations and purported democratizations in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have included the arrests and prosecution of high-ranking officials on what appear to be genuine cases of corruption and abuse of office, but only when it enhances the stability of those autocratic regimes (RFE/RL's Uzbek Service 2023; BBC News 2022).

Despite the prevalence of defamation and cybercrime laws used to silence dissent, civic engagement can become a powerful countervailing force in consolidating more inclusive democracies. Collective action has the power to deliver a strong mandate for change, even in repressive circumstances, as in Thailand, where MFP, a progressive party promising monarchy and military reforms, won the most votes in an election that saw a record voter turnout. Election observers noted that the increased participation of civil society and the media led to a more transparent election than in 2019 (ANFREL 2023). Indeed, Thailand's Civic Engagement score is slightly below the global average and is among the strongest performing in Asia and the Pacific; noteworthy in

Figure 5.3. Freedom of the Press improved from 2001 to 2012, but had returned to 2001 levels in 2022 (each dot represents a country)



Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

that it has only increased since the 2014 coup d'état, reflecting the democratic energy that fuelled the 2020–2021 mass demonstrations and calls for monarchy reform. Since 2020, social media has also played a pivotal role in spurring online civic engagement—also believed to have contributed to MFP's victory ([Leesa-Nguansuk 2023](#)).

Anti-corruption commissions and the judiciary

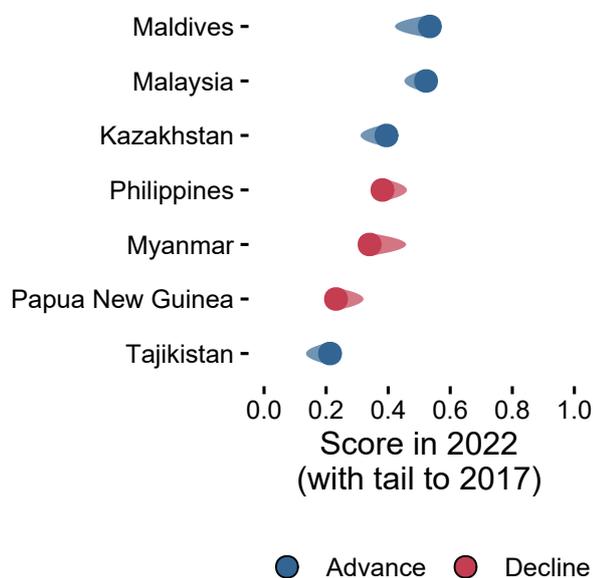
National anti-corruption commissions have proven to be a vital CI for holding political elites accountable.

Australia, whose Absence of Corruption score has not yet recovered from a significant decline in 2013, took the positive step in November 2022 of establishing a federal anti-corruption commission to boost whistleblower protections and investigate public officials for corruption ([The Australia Institute n.d.](#)).

The Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission, established in 2009, has solved several high-profile corruption cases over the years and secured the indictment of two former prime ministers in 2022 and 2023 ([Strangio 2023](#); [Zhu 2022](#)). Malaysia has seen a corresponding statistically significant increase in Absence of Corruption in the last five years (Figure 5.4).

The work of the Indonesian Corruption Eradication Commission (Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi; KPK) led to the 'conviction of hundreds of individuals,

Figure 5.4. Advances and declines in Absence of Corruption in selected countries 2017–2022



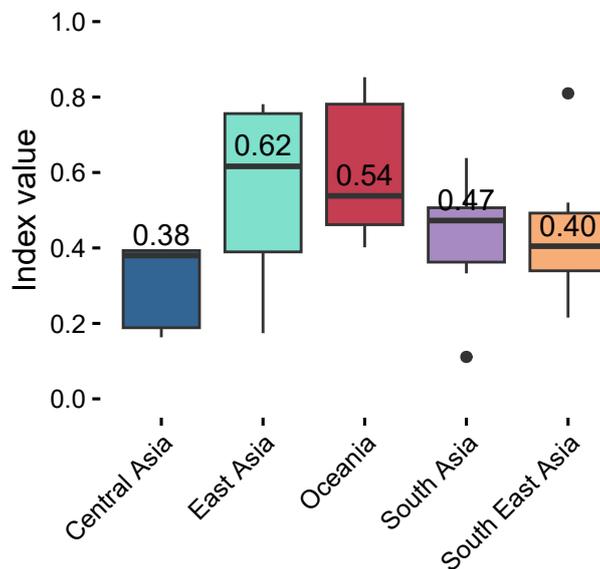
Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

including the former head of the Constitutional Court, the senior deputy governor of the country's central bank, leaders of political parties, government ministers, chairs of regulatory agencies and oversight bodies, as well as subnational executive government heads including governors and mayors' between 2005 and 2019 (Buehler 2019). The KPK's key successes were made possible due to the support it received from other CIs, including CSOs and a mostly free press (Umam et al. 2020). The KPK's years of success eventually provoked an elite backlash. Legislation from 2019 substantially weakened the agency and removed much of its independence, and it is unclear when or if it will recover its former efficacy (Mulholland and Sanit 2020).

As with other CIs, efficacy is conditional on a number of factors. Anti-corruption commissions can only be effective CIs when they are backed by political will, an adequate budget, and most importantly, when they are truly independent of the executive (Quah 2017). A co-opted or constrained anti-corruption commission is likely to fall prey to being used as a political leader's 'attack dog', or a 'paper tiger' used to head off demands for real anti-corruption reform (Quah 2021; Siddiquee and Zafarullah 2022).

As the rise and fall of Indonesia's KPK shows, anti-corruption commissions can be part of a well-functioning and complementary set of democratic CIs, such as well-run and open elections and a free and independent media. They are not a replacement for other CIs or a shortcut to sustainable democratization—both Hong Kong and Singapore established rigorous anti-corruption commissions

Figure 5.5. Distribution of Rule of Law scores by subregion 2022 (median scores for subregions annotated)



Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

that were never intended to push their countries towards a more democratic path (Meagher 2005).

Across the region, the judiciaries have been core defenders of the rule of law and the expansion of civil liberties, but Rule of Law scores show great variation both within and between subregions (Figure 5.5).

The Supreme Courts of Sri Lanka and Pakistan have similarly been called on to uphold the right to vote in response to executive decisions seeking to postpone local elections in 2023 (Perera 2023; Amir 2023). Yet, in defiance of the court orders, elections in both cases remain delayed, signalling growing points of contention between the judiciary and the executive, as democracy is held hostage to funding and politics.

Reliance on the judiciary as a CI is not without drawbacks. A too-strong judiciary may unintentionally undermine or destabilize the executive or parliament (Husain 2018). The overreliance on the Pakistani judiciary for democratic progress may have paved the way for Pakistan's 2023 constitutional crisis by weakening parliament in relation to the military. Dependence on one particular CI can result in a concentration of non-democratic power elsewhere, such as permitting the military to assume more direct power by arguing that it is the only institution capable of providing governance (Ayooob 2022). The top-heavy Pakistani judiciary is also a case study in the 'judicialization' of politics, where the resort to judicial decree

weakens reliance on elections, the core of any democratic polity ([Husain 2018](#)).

Conversely, non-independent and politicized judicial institutions can also be weaponized to restrict fundamental freedoms. In Cambodia and Bangladesh ([see also the case study on Bangladesh](#)), crackdowns on opposition groups in the last year have been facilitated by judicial harassment.

5.4. CONCLUSION

While some Asian and Pacific countries have made progress in the Rule of Law and Representation categories, most nations in the region still lag behind the global average. Restrictions on freedom of speech and media censorship remain areas of concern, and external debt and economic constraints further hinder democratic progress. The judiciary and anti-corruption commissions have emerged as key CIs in safeguarding democratic values, although their efficacy rests on factors such as political will and independence. Broadening civic engagement has renewed demands for democratic change, as seen in Thailand's recent election. Collective efforts will be needed to revitalize key institutions, such as parliaments, to prevent further democratic declines.

Collective efforts will be needed to revitalize key institutions, such as parliaments, to prevent further democratic declines.



Chapter 6

EUROPE

Key findings

- In 2022, there was a deterioration in the scores of long-standing and strong democracies, including Austria, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal and the United Kingdom. Declines have affected a number of indicators, the most common being Rule of Law (especially Predictable Enforcement) and Freedom of the Press. Although these countries remain high-performing in most factors, the declines highlight the importance of constant vigilance in future-proofing democracy.
- In spite of declines in Hungary and Poland, Central Europe was the epicentre of democratic growth, becoming the second-highest performing subregion with regard to Rule of Law. Slovenia experienced a remarkable democratic rebound and is now among those performing in the top 25 per cent with regard to the Absence of Corruption at the global level.
- As a supranational CI, the European Union mobilized intra-EU unity on support and aid for Ukraine, and took steps to revive the enlargement process and to protect democratic norms in its member states. Moldova and Ukraine gained EU candidacy status and the European Council reviewed Georgia's membership application, indicating that it would be ready to grant candidate status to the country once certain steps had been taken. The accession processes in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia were also reinvigorated, and Kosovo was granted the long-awaited visa-free status. Inside the bloc, the EU also finally took concrete actions in the ongoing rule of law disputes with Hungary and Poland.
- The clearly non-democratic group of Azerbaijan, Belarus, Russia and Türkiye has drifted away from the rest of Europe, performing well below the European average across most indicators of democracy.

6.1. INTRODUCTION

Although Europe remains the strongest-performing region in the GSoD Indices, there has been worrying deterioration in some of the region's long-standing high performers. Some of these democracies have seen declines across a number of indicators over the past five years, including Germany, where Credible Elections have been marred by challenges such as weak oversight and campaign finance issues, and Austria, where Rule of Law and Civil Liberties saw declines due to the abuse of public funds, and there was a deterioration in Freedom of Expression and Freedom of the Press following efforts by the former ruling elite to exert influence over the media. Belarus, where President Alexander Lukashenko was until recently commonly referred to as 'Europe's last dictator', has, together with Azerbaijan, Russia and Türkiye, drifted even further away from the regional mainstream, possibly foretelling a return of non-democratic political blocs on the continent (*The Economist* 2021).

Many countries sit between the two poles of high-performing—but modestly declining—Northern and Western European states and Europe's established non-democracies, with international forces providing competing lodestars for domestic political actors. Alongside other challenges, such as persistent inflation and weather patterns exacerbated by climate change, the socio-economic pressures created by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine have placed differentiated stresses on European democratic institutions.

In Georgia, high inflation and significant Russian immigration has gone hand in hand with heightened political polarization. Mass protests and the resilience of citizens there forced the ruling party to drop a controversial 'foreign agents' law, which posed a direct threat to the media and civil society (*Sekhniashvili* 2023). Uncertainty in the Western Balkans has continued, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where Milorad Dodik, the Bosnian Serb leader of the Republika Srpska and a Putin loyalist, has proceeded with secessionist threats and separatist rhetoric, including the adoption of a law rejecting the state-level Constitutional Court's decisions (*Kurtic* 2023; *Sito-Sucic* 2023; *EURACTIV* 2023), and in Kosovo, where tensions escalated in the Serbian-dominated northern municipalities (*Edwards* 2023).

Democracy in Europe, both inside and outside the 27 EU member states, is heavily influenced by the EU's legislative and non-legislative initiatives, many of which are aimed at defending and promoting democratic values. Recent EU initiatives have focused on fostering civic participation, media freedom and ensuring the integrity of elections, especially with regard to countering disinformation and foreign interference (*European Commission n.d., 2022b*). The promotion of gender equality internally and externally is also a high priority for the EU (*European Commission* 2020). Despite its key role as a supranational CI, the EU is not without its flaws. The European Parliament's 'Qatargate' corruption scandal has rocked the EU and has led to reforms, which are pending as the European Parliament prepares for the 2024 elections (*Liboreiro and Psara* 2023; *Cook* 2023; *European Parliament* 2022b).

Although Europe remains the strongest-performing region in the GSoD Indices, there has been worrying deterioration in some of the region's long-standing high performers.

Hungary and Poland, both of which experienced significant declines in five key indicators between 2017 and 2022, are the most notable examples illustrating the bloc's limited ability to exert more direct influence over the (non-)democratic trajectory of its member states (see Box 6.1). Despite the fact that the European Commission has frozen billions of euros in funding for Hungary and Poland due to violations of rights and the rule of law, both countries remain generally unswayed in their direction, beyond some minor changes in approach.

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia will continue to have a significant impact on both regional and domestic dynamics in Europe over the coming years. Security concerns will remain paramount, especially for neighbouring countries or those involved in disputes with Russia or its proxies. Additionally, Europe's political and social institutions have been, and will continue to be, challenged by the influx of Ukrainian refugees, the ongoing migration crisis in the Mediterranean, an energy crisis, inflation and recessions, as well as increased diplomatic and financial efforts to provide support to Ukraine.

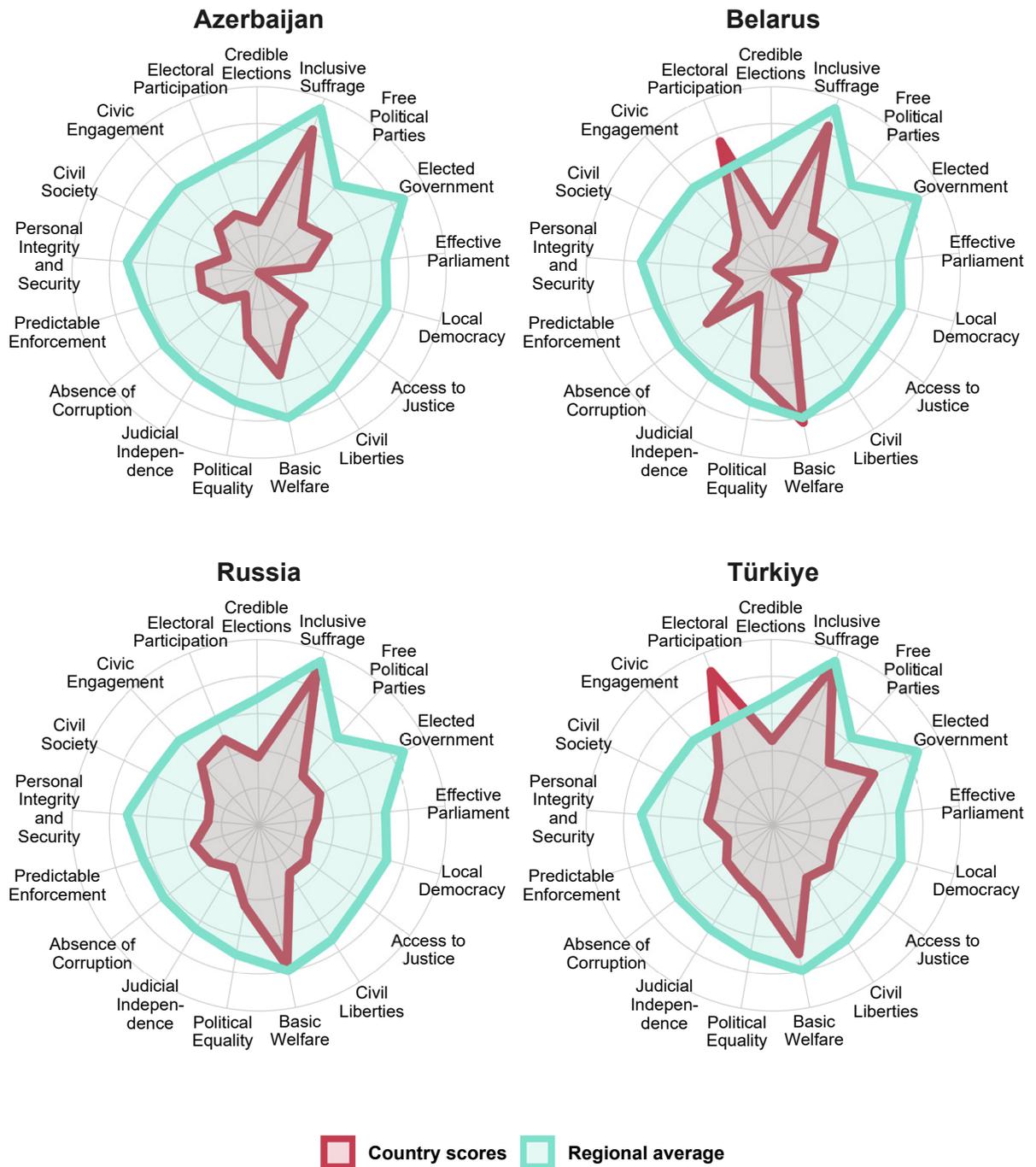
6.2. THE STATE OF DEMOCRACY IN EUROPE

Europe dominates the top 20 positions in the global rankings for all four categories, but there are important subregional variations. Northern and Western Europe's continued high performance belies several important five-year declines, including in Rights and Rule of Law categories. Austria, for example, suffered declines in Freedom of the Press and Freedom of Expression, while Predictable Enforcement declined in the UK. Southern Europe has similarly shown overall stable, high performance, although high-performing Portugal was responsible for half of all declines in Southern Europe (across 11 indicators). Non-democratic Türkiye is an exception in the subregion.

In Eastern Europe, the authoritarian regimes of Azerbaijan, Belarus and Russia stand distinctly apart from their neighbours (as shown in Figure 6.1) and in stark contrast to promising democratic growth in countries such as Armenia and Moldova.

Despite declines in Hungary and Poland, Central Europe is becoming a new locus of democratic growth, with notable five-year improvements in eight countries (Bulgaria, Czechia, Kosovo, Latvia, Lithuania, North Macedonia, Romania and Slovakia). Kosovo's democratic expansion has been prominent, with advances seen in Credible Elections, Personal Integrity and Security, and Freedom of Association and Assembly. North Macedonia's progress has been similarly significant, with improvements seen in Basic Welfare, Elected Government, and Personal Integrity and Security. Over the past year (2021–2022), Central European countries were responsible for 80 per cent of Europe's notable increases.

Figure 6.1. Azerbaijan, Belarus, Russia and Türkiye perform well below the European average across most indicators of democracy



Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

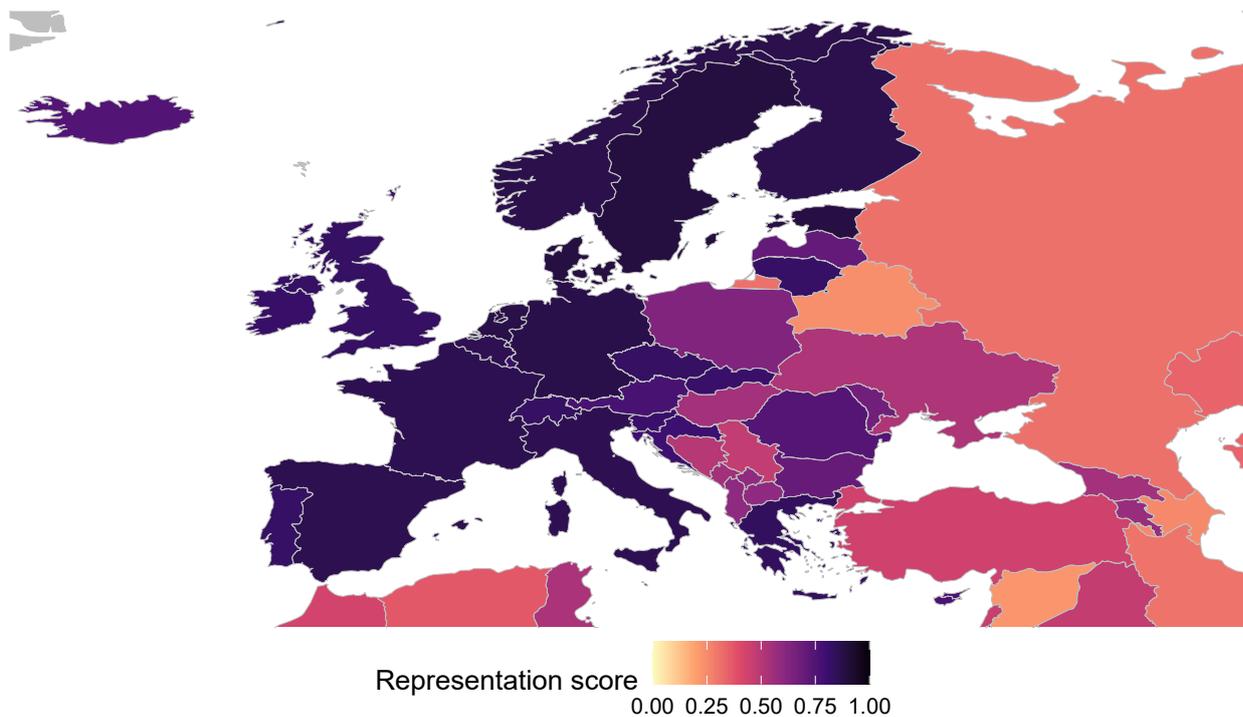
Slovenia emerged as a frontrunner, contributing 45 per cent of European progress, followed by Czechia which gave rise to 20 per cent of the increases. Both countries are models of democratic renewal, after liberal leaders, aided by robust civic mobilization, replaced populists in elections that were deemed referendums on democracy (DW 2021; Euronews 2022a, 2022c; International IDEA 2022i, 2023b).

6.2.1. Representation

Europe continues to be the highest-scoring region on average in Representation, although changes at the subregional level have been limited. In particular, the performance of the Baltic states in Representation is beginning to approach levels seen in Nordic countries (Figure 6.2). Estonia, where women's representation in the parliament set a new record for the country after elections in March 2023, scored above Norway and Finland in Representation (IPU n.d.). In just one year, Estonia (ranked at 3) moved up three places in the Representation rankings. Over the same period, Latvia (44) became the second biggest climber in the global Representation rankings, moving up 13 places.

Although still relatively weak, Central Europe was the only subregion to show improvement on 2021, with Slovenia (27) experiencing a notable climb of eight places in the ranking. Although still a high performer, Portugal (22) suffered the biggest fall in Representation, moving down 13 places.

Figure 6.2. In 2022, Europe is the highest-scoring region on average in Representation, and the Baltic states are beginning to approach levels seen in the Nordic countries



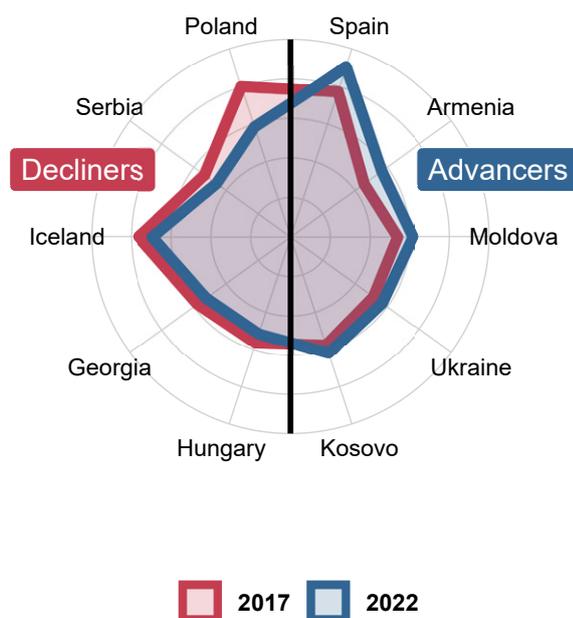
Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

Credible Elections was the factor that saw the most changes over the last five years—first, in terms of deterioration, with relative declines in high performers such as Estonia, Germany and Portugal (Figure 6.3). In Germany, observers from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in the 2021 parliamentary elections pointed to issues such as weak oversight and reporting requirements for campaign finance, as well as to the lack of specific legal provisions for observers. The latter contravenes the 1990 OSCE Copenhagen Document ([OSCE/ODIHR 2022](#)).

Mid-range performers, such as Georgia, Hungary, Iceland, Poland and Serbia, also experienced declines. In Poland, the pattern continues, with amendments to the electoral code approved in March 2023, despite concerns that they infringe the Constitutional Court’s prohibition on changing the electoral code less than six months before elections, and that they favour the incumbent party ([Ptak 2023](#)).

At the same time, Credible Elections was also among the factors showing the most improvements, including in Armenia, Kosovo, Moldova, Spain and Ukraine (Figure 6.3). In snap elections held in July 2023, Spanish voters abroad were, for the first time, automatically sent a ballot, following electoral reforms passed in October 2022 designed to simplify procedures for out-of-country voting ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs, EU and Cooperation 2022](#)).

Figure 6.3. Credible Elections was the factor of Representation with the most changes over the last five years (2017–2022)



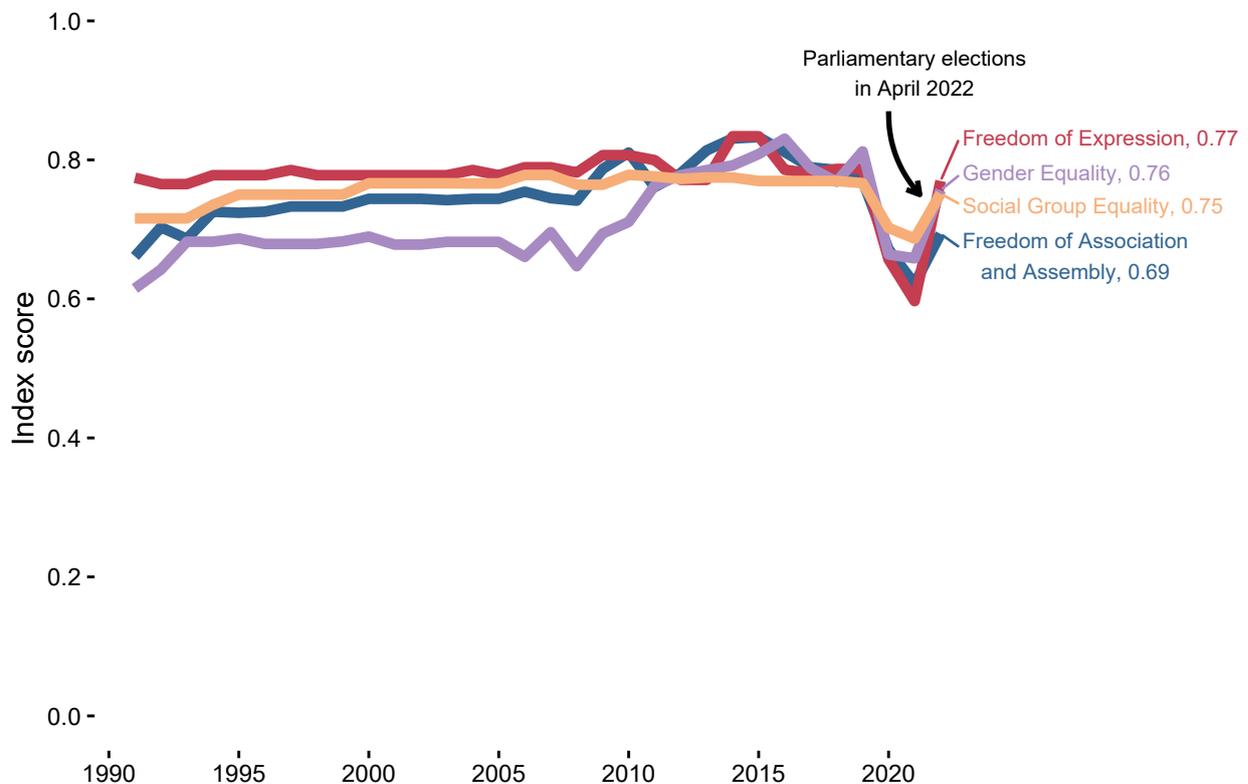
Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

6.2.2. Rights

Europe is also the best-performing region in Rights, occupying 80 per cent of the top 20 places. At the subregional level, Northern/Western Europe has the highest performance in Rights, followed by Southern Europe and Central Europe. Eastern Europe has the lowest performance in Rights, although Azerbaijan, Belarus and Russia heavily pull the scores down for this entire subregion.

Concerning declines in Rights over the last five years have been observed in high performers such as Portugal and Slovenia, which share decreases in Civil Liberties, including Freedom of Association and Assembly, and Freedom of the Press. Slovenia (ranked at 24) may be beginning to recover, as one-year changes show important increases—up 12 places from last year—accounting for 55 per cent of Europe’s advances in the category of Rights (Figure 6.4). In addition to the introduction of reforms aimed at protecting the media and expanding minority rights, Slovenia also legalized same-sex marriage in 2022 (International IDEA 2022i, 2022j, 2023g).

Figure 6.4. Slovenia has experienced remarkable rebounds in democratic performance over the past year (2021–2022)



Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

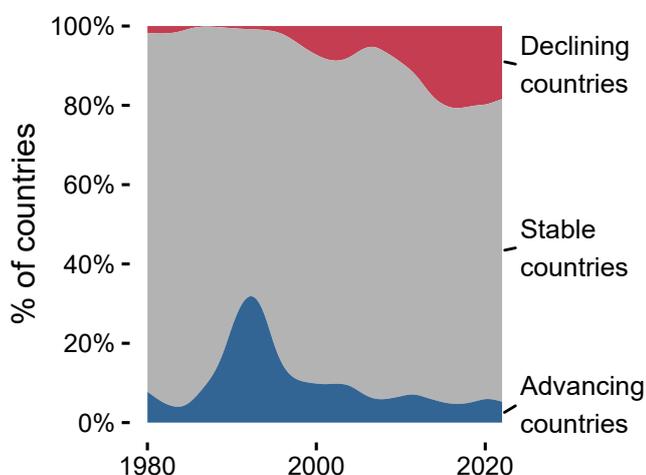
Overall, there has been more progress in Gender Equality, with significant advances in the last five years in Finland, Iceland, Malta and Moldova, countries which are now all high-performing in this factor. During the same period, only Belarus showed notable declines. Human rights experts have documented harassment of female political activists in Belarus, including threats of being separated from their children and of torture (UN News 2021; Amnesty International 2021; Manenkov and Litvinova 2020; DW 2020).

In the last five years, four times as many countries have experienced declines in Freedom of the Press as have advanced (only two countries: Armenia and Moldova) (Figure 6.5). Declines have affected high performers, such as Germany, the Netherlands and Portugal, most often linked to worsening self-censorship by the media. In Germany and Portugal, experts have expressed concerns about the surveillance of journalists, particularly with regard to the confidentiality of sources (RSF 2023; IPI 2021). While the Netherlands has stepped up preventative protection measures and established investigation agreements with law enforcement and public prosecutors since 2019, experts warn that self-censorship may arise as a consequence of signs of rising aggression against journalists (Media Freedom Rapid Response 2022). Germany (2) and the Netherlands (17) stay in the top 20 positions in the global rankings for Rights; Portugal (31) remains steady compared with last year.

6.2.3. Rule of Law

Rule of Law rankings show notable variation (Figure 6.6), especially in Central Europe, which overtook Southern Europe to become the second-strongest performing subregion. Progress in Central Europe is uneven: while Czechia (ranked at 23) and Slovenia (30) each rose 11 positions in the Rule of Law

Figure 6.5. There have been more declines than advances in Freedom of the Press in Europe over the last five years



Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

Figure 6.6. There have been more declines than advances in Rule of Law in Europe over the last five years, including in high and mid-range performers (2017–2022)



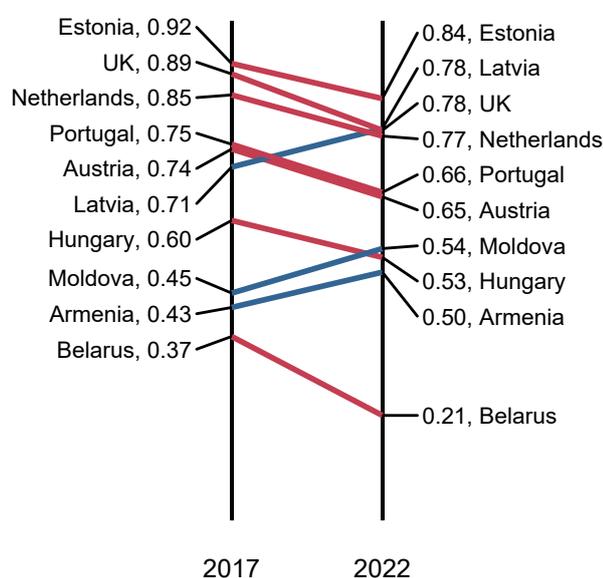
Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

rankings compared with last year, Hungary (64) and Austria (36) fell 6 and 8 places, respectively. The latest GRECO report raised concerns about Austria's need to improve the regulations that oversee ministers' and state secretaries' outside activities (GRECO 2023).

Absence of Corruption is the factor with the largest number of countries showing advances, including Armenia, Lithuania, Moldova and Romania. Compared with five years ago, Ukraine has also improved in Absence of Corruption, particularly by addressing corrupt practices, theft and embezzlement within the executive and public sectors (OECD 2022). Moldova's anti-corruption protests, like Ukraine's 2014 Revolution of Dignity and Armenia's 2018 Velvet Revolution, have given rise to new leaders who have introduced pro-EU and anti-corruption reforms (Blatt and Schlauffer 2021; Brett, Knott and Popșoi 2015). In Moldova (Figure 6.7), the government has focused on reforming the judiciary through the adoption of a law on pre-vetting of candidates to judicial and prosecutorial councils and the establishment of a new anti-corruption court (European Commission 2022a; Neacsutu 2023).

Notable declines took place even among high performers such as the UK, which saw significant falls in Rule of Law and Predictable Enforcement due to weakened domestic institutions. These bodies (extending from members of parliament, particularly the upper house, to political parties) experienced various challenges, including around the use of taxpayers' money, breaches of

Figure 6.7. Moldova has seen advances in several factors of Rule of Law compared with five years ago (2017–2022)



Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

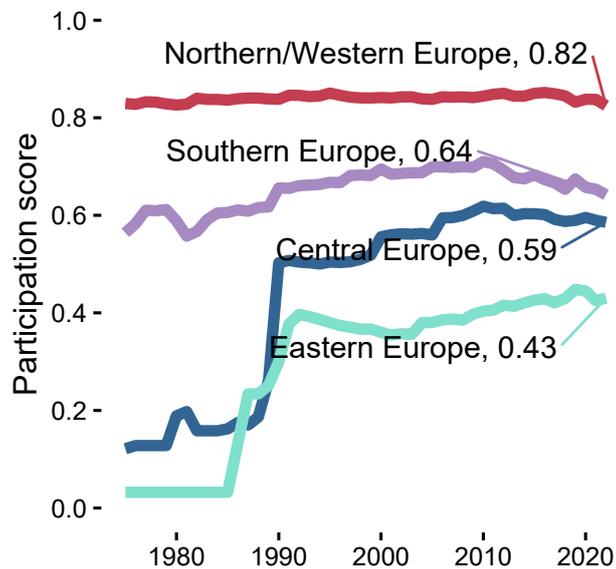
ethics rules and alleged abuse of public office (Gye and Gallagher 2023; Conn and Lewis 2022; Keefe 2022; Heathershaw et al. 2021).

6.2.4. Participation

Participation has stagnated in Europe, although 8 of the top 10 countries in the global rankings are European. Northern/Western Europe was the highest-performing subregion in Participation in 2022, followed by Southern Europe, Central Europe and finally Eastern Europe (Figure 6.8). Participation is a hopeful area for the future of democracy, demonstrating the strength of people's commitment to making their voices heard. For example, in 2023, Moldova, which has climbed 14 places in the Participation rankings compared with five years ago, held the largest and most peaceful Pride march in its history in Chisinau, despite the mayor's announcement that the city would not authorize the march (Radio Europa Liberă Moldova 2023).

Sweden experienced an overall decline in Participation and is joined by Luxembourg in seeing falls in Civic Engagement. This suggests a decline in people's involvement with institutions like political associations, non-political associations and independent trade unions. While Sweden remains a global leader with strong labour market institutions, trade union membership has recently declined (Bender 2023; Kjellberg 2023). Rising consumer prices and shrinking real wages have made membership too expensive, particularly in unions affiliated with the Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO), disproportionately affecting low-income workers.

Figure 6.8. The Participation category shows overall stagnation



Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023.

6.3. COUNTERVAILING INSTITUTIONS IN EUROPE

6.3.1. The European Union as a supranational countervailing institution

Unlike many other regional bodies, the EU has demonstrated the will and capacity to hold member states to certain principles and standards of democracy that form the foundation of the Union. It has also engaged in external democracy promotion (Brasseur, Pachta and Grigolo 2023; Youngs et al. 2023). In 2022, the EU took major steps in its long-running rule of law dispute with Hungary and Poland, freezing billions of euros worth of funds and announcing legal action to protect judicial independence and prevent executive aggrandizement (International IDEA 2022f, 2023f; Kość 2023). But like all CIs, EU institutions are neither omnipotent nor immune to politics, and the European Commission continues to tread carefully around these two member states to maintain the necessary consensus and avoid political backlash (Schlippak and Treib 2016; Scicluna and Auer 2023).

Externally, the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine has driven the EU to provide and mobilize political, humanitarian, financial and military support to Ukraine (European Council and the Council of the EU 2023b). Some of this aid has targeted future recovery and reconstruction measures, which are essential to ensuring that the country's pre-war democratic institutions remain as resilient as possible (European Council and the Council of the EU 2023a). These efforts have demonstrated how, when sufficient political support is mobilized, EU institutions can be powerful tools for supporting democratic actors and institutions outside the bloc (Freyburg et al. 2015).

Box 6.1. Hungary, Poland and the EU's shifting dynamics

Hungary and Poland have for years stymied the attempts of fellow member states and EU institutions to enforce the democratic norms and rule of law commitments that are the foundation of EU membership. In both countries, the illiberal toolkit is quite similar: suppression of rights by targeting academic freedoms (especially in Hungary) and the LGBTQIA+ community and by tightening abortion policies (Thorpe 2020; Hajdari 2023b; Cseh 2023; International IDEA 2022e, 2022g, 2022h). They foster anti-migrant rhetoric, infringe EU laws and erode formal CIs and fourth-branch institutions, so little or no oversight on the executive remains (Krzysztosek 2023b; Liboreiro 2023c; Braun 2023). According to the GSoD Indices, between 2017 and 2022, Hungary experienced notable declines in Credible Elections, Elected Government, Social Group Equality, Rule of Law and Predictable Enforcement, whereas Poland underwent significant deteriorations in Representation, Access to Justice, Judicial Independence, Absence of Corruption and Credible Elections.

A turning point came in February 2022, when appeals by Hungary and Poland against the Conditionality Mechanism at the Court of Justice were dismissed (Court of Justice of the European Union 2022), allowing

the EU to begin withholding billions of euros in funds from Hungary and Poland for systemic violations of the rule of law and abrogation of rights.

While both countries have responded by initiating some reforms, it remains to be seen whether the Conditionality Mechanism will ultimately lead to genuine change, or fall prey to Hungarian and Polish state propaganda which portrays their government as victims of domineering EU institutions (Simon 2023; Szumski 2023). For its part, the 2023 Rule of Law Report underscored the EU's seriousness, demanding more comprehensive reforms from the two countries before their access to funds would be restored (European Commission 2023b).

This shift signals a new approach from democracies to illiberal-leaning countries in the EU. Poland was subject to calls for full-scale international election observation (Sikora 2023; Tilles 2023); Hungary was not invited to the Summit for Democracy, and serious questions have been raised about its fitness to hold the EU's rotating presidency in 2024 (Liboreiro and Zsiros 2023; Sorgi 2023b). The EU has signalled that democratic erosion will encounter robust opposition going forward, but in doing so has staked its credibility on its ability to follow through and deliver on its commitment.

The EU's efforts to help Ukraine come as the economic repercussions of Russia's war on Ukraine continue to be felt throughout Europe. The war triggered energy shortages and led to soaring prices in many basic goods and industrial components, resulting in the rising cost of living and a flood of pessimistic economic forecasts. Despite the Eurozone falling into recession in early 2023, Europe has shown more resilience than expected (Treeck 2023; Tamma 2023; Dmitracova 2023; Liboreiro 2023a; Euronews 2022b). Measures introduced, especially by EU member states' governments, including energy subsidies, caps on electricity prices or tax incentives, have helped to curb inflation and enabled the European Central Bank to refrain from raising interest rates as much as other major economies (Jha 2023; Weber 2022).

Efforts to promote and support democracy do not end in Ukraine. Through its accession processes, the mediating system of the European Parliament and the norm-setting efforts of the European Commission, there is widespread work being done to extend democratic practices and strengthen institutions across the bloc, albeit unevenly and imperfectly (Cianetti, Dawson and Hanley 2018). Russia's war in Ukraine has mobilized the EU to expand rather than defensively contract. Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova and Ukraine have each achieved candidate status. Georgia's membership application was reviewed and the EU indicated where improvements are needed for the country to

receive candidacy status ([see also the case study on Georgia](#)). In Albania and North Macedonia, accession talks were launched in 2022. Croatia joined the Eurozone and Schengen Area, and citizens of Kosovo will be able to travel visa-free within the EU as of 2024 ([see also the case study on the Western Balkans](#)). Accession processes, when done correctly, provide key institutional and legal resources for democratic and institution-building forces in candidate countries ([Bargués and Morillas 2021](#)).

The European Parliament, as the EU's sole directly elected law-making body, representing almost 500 million citizens, has—until now—exerted limited influence as a CI. While it could theoretically both counterbalance undemocratic tendencies in its member states and mediate concerns over the degree of authority assigned to the European Commission, it has not historically played such a role ([Karayanidi 2011](#); [Lehne 2023](#)). However, the European Parliament has recently proposed reforms, which are yet to be approved by member states, to give European voters more direct control over EU processes. These reforms include enhancing voters' roles in selecting the Commission president and introducing pan-European Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) to complement national candidates ([Jack 2022](#); [European Parliament 2022a](#)).

Additionally, the Qatargate corruption scandal, which rocked the European Parliament in 2022, is a stark reminder that even the reformers are not immune to corruption ([Liboreiro and Psara 2023](#)). Qatargate revealed several weaknesses of the EU, including a troubled ethics system and the lack of post-mandate rules for MEPs ([Alemanno 2023](#)). Reform plans are ongoing, but some—such as stricter rules on transparency, accountability and integrity—have resulted in pushback and dissatisfaction ([European Parliament 2023](#); [Sorgi 2023a](#); [Greens/EFA 2023](#)).

6.3.2. Domestic institutions as countervailing institutions

Courts and legislatures

Over the last five years, courts and legislatures have struggled to check executive power in Europe. Instead, executives have used weakened parliaments and courts to crack down on electoral integrity and on the opposition. In Poland, the ruling Law and Justice party (PiS) has been criticized for using parliamentary practices to prevent public or opposition debate on legislation ([Venice Commission 2017](#)). It has given itself more power over the judiciary since taking office in 2015, including through the appointment of loyalists to the Constitutional Tribunal, which reviews the constitutionality of laws and rules on the validity of elections. It also leveraged its majority in the parliament and the help of its 'former' member, President Andrzej Duda, to pass controversial laws. For example, the government was able to postpone local elections in 2022 despite suspicions it breached the constitutional principle of tenure, and signed the so-called 'Tusk Law', described by critics as a way to target the opposition. This move prompted the European Commission to send a notice to Poland for violations of EU law ([International IDEA 2022h](#); [European Commission 2023a](#); [Hajdari 2023c](#); [Liboreiro 2023b](#)).

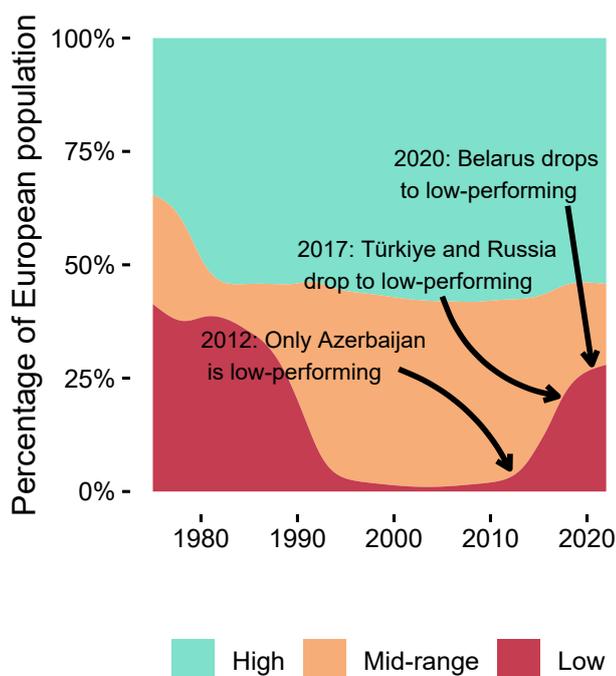
The need to build up formal CIs is present even among high-performing countries. In response to the childcare benefits scandal in the Netherlands, in which the Dutch Tax and Customs Administration used discriminatory algorithms to falsely accuse thousands of parents of fraud in their applications for benefits, the government has begun considering reforms that would allow courts to rule on the constitutionality of laws passed by parliament (House of Representatives 2020; Darroch 2022).

Fourth-branch institutions

Politicians have used the risk of foreign interference to crack down on critical CIs, such as the media, independent agencies and civil society. While most (53 per cent) of Europe live in a high-performing country with regard to Rights, over the past decade the proportion of the population living in a country with low performance in Rights has risen (reaching 29 per cent in 2022, compared with only 1 per cent in 2012) (Figure 6.9). Over this period, Belarus, Russia and Türkiye have shifted from mid-range to low-performing in Rights.

Many of these declines have been driven by attacks on independent media, which are occurring even in countries where performance in Rights is high. Greece, which has experienced a five-year decline in Freedom of Expression,

Figure 6.9. The proportion of Europe's population living in a country with low performance in Rights was on the rise between 2012 and 2022



Sources: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023 and The World Bank, World Development Indicators, 2023.

has been confronting a sprawling surveillance scandal, which implicated both the government and the intelligence service in extra-legal hacking and surveillance of journalists ([International IDEA 2022d](#)). In Austria, which also experienced notable decreases in both Freedom of the Press and Freedom of Expression during the same period, ex-Chancellor Sebastian Kurz has been implicated in schemes to shut down critical media and purchase positive coverage by using public funds through the Ministry of Finance ([Gall 2019](#); [Jones 2023](#)).

Similar phenomena have been observed in lower-performing democracies, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the Republika Srpska parliament voted to criminalize defamation in July 2023 and made the unauthorized publication of video recordings and photographs punishable by imprisonment for up to two years. Journalists and NGOs have resisted the legislation, saying it can be used to constrain public discourse ([Media Freedom Rapid Response 2023](#)). In Georgia, which experienced a significant decline in Freedom of Expression, the ruling Georgian Dream party has overseen increased media concentration and broader surveillance, and has used the regulatory powers of the nominally independent Georgian National Communications Commission (GNCC) to punish critical and opposition media ([International IDEA 2022a](#), [2022b](#), [2022c](#)).

Positive cases exist despite these overall negative signs. In Slovenia, after years of government interference, a referendum endorsed a law—previously approved by the parliament—aimed at safeguarding the independence of the public broadcaster Radio-Television of Slovenia (RTV) ([International IDEA 2022j](#)). The reforms include a role for civil society in the appointment of RTV's central management body, which local organizations welcomed after years of difficult relations with the previous administration ([European Civic Forum and Civic Space Watch 2023](#)).

Similarly, independent bodies have been critical in the protection of rights and the rule of law. In Malta, the Broadcasting Authority upheld an impartiality complaint filed against a media outlet owned by the ruling Labour Party ([International IDEA 2023e](#)). Europe's privacy watchdogs have served as a key fourth-branch institution, drawing attention to the potential risks of artificial intelligence and raising concerns around chatbot ChatGPT's encroachment on data privacy rights and fomentation of misinformation. Such developments could impact countries' scores for Personal Integrity and Security. Italy's Data Protection Authority resolved to temporarily block ChatGPT in March 2023, citing friction between ChatGPT and EU data privacy regulations ([International IDEA 2023d](#)).

When CIs such as civil society, the judiciary and legislatures engage in cross-institutional cooperation—such as the February 2023 passage of transgender rights legislation in Finland, which was made possible by decades of campaigning and a 2017 decision by the European Court of Human Rights—performance in Rights remains steady or improves ([International IDEA 2023c](#)). Finnish civil society groups have long campaigned against medical and psychological requirements for legal gender transitions and these efforts

rapidly gained traction when the European Court of Human Rights held that mandatory sterilization as a condition of gender transition violated article 8 of the European Convention of Human Rights in a key case brought by transgender French citizens against France ([European Court of Human Rights 2017](#)).

However, cross-institutional collaboration is not necessarily seamless. The Spanish sexual consent law, 'Solo sí es sí' (only yes is yes), was made possible by mass protests and collaboration between a coalition of parliamentary parties and organized feminist civil society groups ([International IDEA 2023h](#)). An unintended loophole in the law, however, resulted in the release of over 100 convicted individuals, as well as a reduction in sentences for over 1,000 people convicted of violent sexual crimes. Efforts to close the loophole in 2023 fractured the coalition, leaving the ruling Socialists to pass amendments in April 2023 that undid, in the eyes of civil society and the left-wing Podemos party, the original law's primary accomplishments ([Abend 2023](#); [Hedgecoe 2023](#)).

Popular protest and mass movements

In situations where institutional CIs are unable to prevent centralization of power or ensure government responsiveness to popular needs, people increasingly turn to citizen action to exercise popular control over decision making. According to the Global Protest Tracker, Europe has seen more protests than any other region since 2017. The most common motivations were concerns over fuel prices or the rising cost of living; others mobilized against corruption or in favour of rights protections ([Carnegie Endowment for International Peace 2023](#)). For example, in Poland, demonstrations organized by CSO groups led the government to back down from further restricting access to abortion ([Krzysztozek 2023a](#)).

Other CIs have been active, but with mixed results in terms of shoring up levels of participation. Trade unions in the UK were unable to act effectively to stop a law on minimum service requirements for essential services during strikes, with implications for civic engagement. In Luxembourg, however, NGOs, media and local authorities all played important roles in raising awareness of new measures allowing foreign nationals to vote in municipal elections and in encouraging people to register in time for the June 2023 local elections ([Sharp 2023](#); [Lambert 2022](#)).

Smaller protests and forms of horizontal organization exist in non-democracies and serve largely the same function as they do in democracies ([Morris, Semenov and Smyth 2023](#)). However, governments like those in Belarus, Russia and Türkiye attempt to strictly limit the scope of protest and deliberately erode civic space when movements become too organized ([Armstrong and Guerin 2023](#); [RFE/RL's Russian Service 2023](#)), constraining civil society. In Belarus, anti-government protests between 2020 and 2021 were met with further repression, including the entry into force in January 2023 of a law making it possible to revoke the citizenship of Belarusians abroad on the grounds of participation in 'extremist activities' ([Radio Svaboda 2022](#);

Ilyash 2023; HRW 2021). People remain committed to democratic modes of participation, even in countries with low democratic performance at the institutional level and, at times, despite great personal risk. Rural protests in Azerbaijan, against protracted government inaction over water shortages in March 2023, and against the expansion of a local mining project in June, have been met with violent crackdowns (International IDEA 2023a; Council of Europe 2023).

The ongoing challenges in long-standing democracies, as well as the serious deterioration in younger democracies, serve as a reminder of the required vigilance in protecting CIs.

6.4. CONCLUSION

Europe continues to show the highest democratic performance globally, with many countries, especially in Northern and Western Europe, boasting long histories of strong institutional and non-institutional CIs (Bohlen 2022). It is promising that the long-established gap between these subregions and Central Europe, the Baltic states and parts of Eastern Europe has started to shrink. As a supranational CI, the EU mobilized support for Ukraine and demonstrated its ability to promote democratic resilience in member and non-member states. Nevertheless, the ongoing challenges in long-standing democracies, such as Austria and the UK, as well as the serious deterioration in younger democracies, such as Poland, serve as a reminder of the required vigilance in protecting CIs. The trajectory of the non-democratic group of Azerbaijan, Belarus, Russia and Türkiye serves as a striking illustration of how illiberal countries can exert a destabilizing influence on the overall stability of a predominantly democratic region.

Chapter 7

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

GLOBAL RECOMMENDATIONS

The following analysis makes clear that collaboration between the formal and informal institutions, movements and organizations that check and balance power is critical to thriving democracies and to creating openings for change in non-democracies. All stakeholders who have an interest in reinforcing the legitimacy of the democratic model of governance have a role to play in creating, maintaining and supporting such collaboration, as well as being innovative in shaping such cooperation. With that in mind, International IDEA recommends the following actions.

In order to safeguard the bedrock institutions of representative government:

1. To counter declines in Credible Elections, governments and electoral management bodies must frame their work *in the service of* citizens. Elections are not a privilege; they are a right in democratic systems. As such, all stakeholders—and especially electoral management bodies, the media and the courts—must ensure that electoral activities are based on facilitating equal access to all phases of the electoral process. At a minimum, this includes equality of contestation and equality of participation, as well as certainty about the ‘rules of the game’ (James, Clark and Asplund 2023).
2. Parliaments should focus on increasing public participation opportunities and transparency of legislative action. Parliamentary bodies should prioritize facilitating easy and inclusive public access to records and parliamentary questioning, as well as the proceedings of relevant committees. They should also disseminate and promote public access to any reporting on government performance (Open Government Partnership n.d.).

All stakeholders who have an interest in reinforcing the legitimacy of the democratic model of governance have a role to play in creating, maintaining and supporting collaboration between the formal and informal institutions.

3. Cross-regional and cross-sectoral partnerships—both between different parliaments and between parliaments and other CIs—can share a wealth of valuable lessons with participants. Donors and democracy support organizations should prioritize support for the creation and maintenance of such partnership networks, which may be useful for more effective parliaments.

In order to protect the rule of law, judiciaries and regulatory bodies that are finding themselves increasingly in the limelight for their work on checking power:

1. Governments should consult with judiciaries and judicial services bodies to co-create mechanisms that allow for the reporting, investigation and punishment of actions that harm judicial integrity, with a focus on cases or individuals that have an impact on power groups or that are relevant to politically sensitive issues. When judges are the subjects of punitive measures, these measures must be transparent, impartial and oriented around the protection of the rights of those affected ([OHCHR 2022b](#)).
2. Governments must ensure that prosecutors and their offices are independent and that their independence is protected by laws that are in line with the Guidelines on the Role of Prosecutors ([UN 1990](#); [OHCHR 2022b](#)).
3. Governments must protect and proactively enhance the independence of formal and informal regulatory and watchdog bodies by facilitating regular monitoring of these organizations' ability to meaningfully fulfil their duties. Transparency International's regular assessments of anti-corruption agencies and the Westminster Foundation for Democracy's assessment framework for independent oversight institutions and regulatory agencies are strong examples of such assessment and monitoring mechanisms ([Transparency International n.d.](#); [De Vrietze 2019](#)).

To counter continuing, serious deterioration in freedoms of expression, association and assembly and to defend the work of media and civil society:

1. Governments must recommit to protecting the freedoms of expression, association and assembly, by updating their laws and ensuring that they are in line with international human rights standards. Key here is digital literacy and its role in combating violence, ensuring equitable knowledge societies and promoting self-protection. The 53rd session of the United Nations Human Rights Council includes a session on the freedom of opinion and expression, and it is devoted specifically to digital, media and information literacy ([UN General Assembly 2022b, 2023b](#)).
2. Civil society organizations should continue to lead in conducting assessments of states' protection of these rights. Their efforts should include rigorous data collection that allows the world to clearly see progress or regression in state performance ([UN General Assembly 2023a](#)).

3. Governments must ensure that there is a strong, independent and impartial mechanism that can receive and act on reports of violations of the rights of journalists and members of civil society organizations. This resource should be part of a network of mechanisms and norms within governments that integrate protection of civil society and the media into laws and training. Mexico's Protection Mechanism for Human Rights Defenders and Journalists, which includes bodyguards, armoured cars, panic buttons and other assistance to journalists, provides the framework for such a mechanism. In recent years, however, the Mexican mechanism has suffered from serious budget cuts that have made its operation severely challenging (Vivanco 2020).

AFRICA

1. **Cooperate to consolidate democratic norms:** African Union member states should engage in strategic agenda-setting to counter the negative influences of geopolitical dynamics that continue to undermine democratic governance and overall stability on the continent. In addition, through its Peace and Security Council and in collaboration and coordination with the Regional Economic Communities, the African Union should develop a carefully crafted sanctions regime to punish errant political and military elites who capture power unconstitutionally.
2. **Comply with continental and regional court rulings:** Member states of the African Union and the Regional Economic Communities must protect the democratic norms established by these bodies, by taking their support and enforcement mechanisms seriously. This means consistently complying with the rulings of continental and regional courts, such as the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights, the ECOWAS Court of Justice and the East African Court of Justice. National courts also have an important role in upholding the international instruments to which states have committed themselves, including the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) and the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG).
3. **Sustain civic pressure:** Government respect for democratic norms can be enhanced where sustained pressure from civil society is exerted on it to do so. Civil society organizations, including cultural, labour and civic organizations, should, in collaboration with the private sector, use their networks and expertise to shine a spotlight on government abuses and bring democratic norms to the forefront of society.
4. **Protect the independence of oversight institutions:** As a means of constraining and balancing dominant executive branches, donors and democracy assistance providers should target the strengthening of the independent regulatory and oversight bodies known as fourth-branch institutions, alongside continued efforts to protect judicial independence

and improve the capabilities of legislatures. Fourth-branch institutions, including electoral management bodies, ombuds offices, anti-corruption agencies and human rights commissions, must be protected from political interference, which continues to hamper their effectiveness. The design and functioning of South Africa's Chapter 9 Institutions offer valuable lessons in this regard, particularly the role that the South African Constitutional Court has played in protecting their independence ([Fombad 2016](#); [Konstant 2016](#); [Tushnet 2021](#)).

- 5. Protect civic space—online and on the street:** Popular movements can have a role as a countervailing institution of last resort, but this requires positive steps on the part of both governments and the leaders of popular movements. Governments must respect the rights of the people to freely assemble and to organize on social media. They should desist from shutting down the Internet and ensure that, when policing protests, law enforcement officials deploy force against protesters only where it is necessary and proportionate ([Kiai and Heyns 2016](#); [UN General Assembly 2022a](#)). At the same time, popular movements must not allow legitimate protests to fall into violence. Recent high-profile cases in Ghana, Kenya and Sierra Leone show that this remains a problem ([Mensah 2022](#); [Mersie 2023](#); [Akinwotu 2022](#)), and movements should take all available measures to prevent violence, including sticking to the protest route, ensuring participants are aware of prohibited conduct and maximizing communication with law enforcement officials ([Right2Protest and Action Takers n.d.](#); [Nassauer 2019](#)).

WESTERN ASIA

- 1. Provide greater support for civil society:** Donors and assistance organizations should support the in-country individuals and institutions who possess the skill sets required by emergent civil society groups and activists. Even if there is no immediate opportunity for change, nascent groups can learn from professionals and grow over time. Assistance should also go to diaspora communities and regional networks working to promote democracy, who can help build support internationally for the work of those inside relevant countries. Multilateral organizations and donors should provide greater support to civil society and community leaders in the field of civic and political education. By engaging citizens in political processes and promoting holistic civic education, donors and others can help raise awareness about the role and potential of local, regional and international human rights mechanisms, bolstering public support and demand for these institutions and for democratic principles more widely ([Sabatini et al. 2022](#)).
- 2. Revitalize public engagement with legislatures:** Members of parliaments, civil society and members of the public should advocate for mechanisms of dialogue between legislatures and the public that facilitate communication and increased access to legislative proceedings

and decisions. In the context of restricted civic space, it is difficult to disseminate public information, but incremental steps can increase public awareness and civil education, and they can lead to significant reform over time (IPU and UNDP 2017).

AMERICAS

1. **Strengthen collaboration with countervailing institutions in security:**

Governments should focus on strategies that address crime and citizen security through a democratic lens, including by prioritizing the professionalization of civilian security and enforcement agencies and of anti-corruption mechanisms over the use of armed forces in policing. Legislatures should strengthen oversight of executive decrees that authorize the participation of armed forces in policing and, through dialogue with the relevant authorities, consider alternatives such as increased training of civilian security forces. Security agencies should seek out collaboration schemes with national human rights institutions (OHCHR 1990). The work of the International Committee of the Red Cross with Brazilian police in human rights training (ICRC 2022) is a strong example in this regard.

2. **Increase citizen engagement to rebuild trust:** The executive branch, legislatures and judiciaries should maintain regular mechanisms for communication with the public and integrate civil society in this regard. Such dialogue is critical to maintaining the balance of power and to rebuilding citizens' trust in democratic institutions. The Dominican Republic's dialogue with multiple stakeholders throughout its discussions on government reform and digital priorities is good practice in this regard (Ricklefs 2022; Presidencia de la Republica Dominicana 2021).

3. **Ensure free and safe public debate in the context of elections:** Legislatures and electoral management bodies should collaborate to ensure that provisions to prevent harassment and disinformation are in place, while protecting free speech, especially with regard to civil society and the media and in the context of elections. The cross-regional joint declaration issued by the United Nations, Organization of American States, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights on freedom of expression, and more recent work by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of expression on online safety for journalists and on disinformation, should serve as guiding principles and international standards (OHCHR 2017, 2021, 2022a).

4. **Increase international cooperation on electoral management bodies' independence:** Given the crucial role of electoral management bodies (EMBs) in ensuring credible elections and safeguarding citizen trust in elected officials, International IDEA reiterates its previous recommendation that international bodies and their member states, particularly in the

context of the inter-American human rights system, ‘consider creating a Special Rapporteur on the independence of EMBs, similar to current initiatives supporting the independence of judges or freedom of opinion or expression’ ([International IDEA 2022a](#)).

ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

- 1. Build regional cooperation:** In the face of enhanced competition between great powers, states across Asia and the Pacific should strengthen multilateral cooperation to protect regional democracy, domestic policy autonomy and states’ capacity to provide for the well-being of their citizens. The Council of Europe’s European Court of Human Rights and the Organization of American States’ Inter-American Commission on Human Rights offer mechanisms for promoting mutual accountability in other contexts, which are useful models. While forums like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) do exist, stronger international cooperation is needed to deal with an array of challenges. These range from security and rights concerns, such as the junta in Myanmar, to global collective action issues, such as the need to push global creditors to constructively participate in sovereign debt management and reconstruction practices.
- 2. Maintain complementary countervailing institutions:** Given the mixed track record of judiciaries and technocratic institutions like anti-corruption bureaus, democratic governments in Asia and the Pacific should strengthen disparate, mutually reinforcing, complementary countervailing institutions. Institutional protections against authoritarian overreach should not be so strong that they undermine democratic institutions from an unexpected direction, like ‘paper tiger’ anti-corruption commissions or politicized judiciaries. Donor governments can provide support to the co-development of mutually supporting electoral management bodies, anti-corruption bodies and judiciaries.
- 3. Strengthen parliamentary oversight:** Parliaments should improve oversight mechanisms to enhance public confidence and strengthen the legitimacy of their countries’ political institutions. Parliamentarians should leverage the expertise and the scrutinizing power of civil society and the media to harmonize competing interests when holding the government to account, while also providing the opposition, minority parties and the general public with opportunities to engage in oversight activities. The public consultations on electoral bills conducted by the Fijian Parliament, as well as the engagement between parliament and civil society organizations in Malaysia driving the government to introduce gender impact assessments to all bills in the country as a gender-sensitive scrutiny tool, provide useful examples ([Parliament of the Republic of Fiji 2021](#); [INTER PARES n.d.](#)).
- 4. Support media freedom and pluralism:** Donors and democracy assistance providers should scale up efforts in providing technical and

financial assistance to independent media initiatives, while at the same time advocating for robust legal protections for journalists. Given the inconsistent sustainability of historical subscription or ad-based funding models, donors should prioritize long-term core funding as much as possible.

EUROPE

- 1. Continue unwavering support for Ukraine:** European governments must consider the war in Ukraine through a democratic, not geopolitical lens. Supporting Ukraine and its people requires unwavering dedication and a commitment to strengthening Ukraine's democratic institutions. In addition to providing support for European Union accession processes, this also entails assisting Ukraine's efforts to build international support and solidarity for its resistance to Russian imperialism across the Global South ([International IDEA 2022b](#); [Nguyen 2023](#)).
- 2. Ensure EU enlargement processes are consistent and focus on deep-reaching reforms:** The EU should continue to make full use of its mechanisms, including the EU enlargement process and funds, to penalize authoritarian-leaning leaders and reward and incentivize countries that demonstrate progress in democratic performance. Further democratization in the Eastern Partnership and in the Western Balkans regions will depend partially on the EU's ability to present a credible and feasible enlargement and technical assistance approach, and particularly in strengthening collaboration between national parliaments and mutually supportive domestic countervailing institutions. Processes must be seen as fair and rigorous by all sides and citizens in applicant countries must be able to trust that accession decisions are being made on the merits of the country's democratic reforms.
- 3. Promote judicious regional cooperation in Central Europe:** Democracy activists in Central Europe should promote the judicious use of regional cooperation mechanisms and political alliances in support of recent promising democratic developments. This can extend to the Visegrad Group, ensuring that it maintains its focus on supporting grassroots initiatives, and monitoring and defending it from being co-opted to amplify the voices of populist governments at a time of rapidly shifting dynamics in the Group ([Inotai 2023](#)). Central European parliaments should consider the example of the Swedish Committee of Inquiry on the Constitution, an all-party parliamentary committee which researched and proposed constitutional reforms for safeguarding democracy and protecting political institutions against democratic decline ([Ruotsi 2023](#)).
- 4. Build a rights-based approach to tackling foreign interference:** European governments should solicit public expert legal advice on how to protect their elections and political institutions from foreign interference through a rights-based approach, especially heeding relevant advice from

international institutions. The importance of a rights-based approach becomes all the more salient as recent actions related to tackling foreign interference—including ‘Tusk Law’ in Poland, and the proliferation of legislation targeting ‘foreign agents’ such as in Russia and Hungary—have tapped into concerns around national security and may be used to infringe on the rights of critics and political opponents.

Chapter 8

CONCLUSION

Global State of Democracy Indices data reveal that democratic performance around the world remains steady, and that—despite worrying declines in some areas—the democratic gains made between the 1970s and the 2010s have not been erased. Global averages across all categories remain in the mid-range, with Participation scores at the higher end and Rule of Law scores at the lower end.

Some countries' advances in Absence of Corruption in 2022 were particularly encouraging.

A deep-dive into the Rule of Law category sheds light on important lessons for the future of democracy. Rule of Law has experienced significant variation in the factors that it is made up of, with contraction and expansion seen across all of them and in all regions. In many cases, legislatures have proven unable to check the executive by exercising oversight. In some cases, they have also failed to carry out the work related to driving policy agendas forward.

Despite difficulties and even threats, however, courts and fourth-branch institutions have stepped in to fill that space in several instances. Maintaining and growing the independence of these institutions is of critical importance going forward, especially in the face of increasing state capture around the world.

These important countervailing institutions are not alone, however, nor should they act alone. Cross-institutional collaboration is vital, with mutual support helping to build and protect a context for democratic reform and progress. Key illustrations of this kind of cooperation include: the joint efforts of civil society, the courts and the legislature to protect and further gender and sexual rights in countries as diverse as Finland, India and Mexico; the collaboration between independent media, civil society and voters in Slovenia's efforts to bolster the independence of its public broadcaster and the work of civil society; and free media and the anti-corruption commission in Malaysia in the

Global State of Democracy Indices data reveal that the democratic gains made between the 1970s and the 2010s have not been erased.

fight against corruption there. Part of this 'outside' pressure could come from regional bodies, which have thus far been largely limited to setting norms and standards of governance. More political will is needed for these bodies to play meaningful roles as countervailing institutions.

Public mobilization is also crucial and the data suggest a continuing trend towards interested and enthusiastic participation. People continue to make their voices heard, taking to the streets and to social media to protest against economic declines, restrictions on rights, and policies they consider to be unfair and unrepresentative.

Unfortunately, their efforts are often hampered by governments that are threatened by such actions. Indeed, there have been continuing declines in Freedom of Association, Freedom of Expression, and in Personal Integrity and Security around the world. Finding new and innovative ways for people to engage will be the key to addressing the challenges ahead.

The gears of democracy continue to turn, although it may be that the centre of democratic machinery is shifting away from the traditional core institutions of representation to other bodies, organizations and movements. It is critical for stakeholders to consider how this shifting centre has an impact on their own decision making, especially as these new bodies do not necessarily have the support or protection necessary for them to continue in their roles.

People must remain in charge of the levers that activate and steer democracy in the direction of their will. It is up to all of us to protect and defend that public control that lies at the heart of any democratic system.

Annex A. Methodology

THE GLOBAL STATE OF DEMOCRACY METHODOLOGY

The Global State of Democracy (GSoD) Indices measure aspects of democracy and human rights that are central to societies in which there is public control over decision making and decision makers, and in which there is equality in the exercise of that control. While some primary data collection is conducted within International IDEA, the majority of the input data for the GSoD Indices are derived from 20 other publicly available data sources, with a total of 157 input variables.

The result is a collection of 1,837,353 data points on 174 countries over the last 48 years, and the Democracy Tracker event updates include hundreds of reports over the past 12 months. But it is also anchored in the subject matter and regional expertise of International IDEA's staff at our headquarters in Sweden, as well as the work of our colleagues in Belgium, Ethiopia, Fiji, Nepal, the Netherlands, Panama, Peru, Sierra Leone and Tunisia, and many more offices around the world. More than just keeping an ear to the ground, our staff are involved in the day-to-day work of building, protecting and expanding the work of democratic institutions around the world.

This year, we are proud to release a revised conceptual framework that organizes these data points into a hierarchical framework based on four core categories of democratic performance: Representation (representative government), Rights (a respect for human rights), Participation (public participation) and, for the first time, a specific category dedicated to the Rule of Law. Below the four categories are factors (such as Credible Elections or Judicial Independence), several of which make up the categories. Finally, at the lowest level are specific indicators or sub-factors (such as Freedom of Expression or Social Group Equality).

Each index is scaled to range from 0 to 1, with 1 being the most democratic; the boundaries are set by the best and worst observed values across all countries and years.

The GSoD Indices do not include a singular value for democratic quality. Their primary utility is found in the specific categories, which can be used to track progress over time in specific areas of democratic performance within countries and to compare between them.

This year, we have included annual global rankings of country performance for each of the categories of democratic performance—our top-level indices. We also classify countries as high-performing (at least 0.7), mid-range performing (0.4 to 0.69) or low-performing (0.39 and below) in each index.

The focus on category-level performance (rather than on something like regime types) allows for a more nuanced understanding of where democracy is thriving and where it is suffering. It also shifts the focus from the broad idea of democracy generally to specific and narrower aspects of democracy, which are more appropriate to target for reform and intervention.⁶

⁶ All rankings are available as Annex B (in print) and in the online version of the Report.

Annex B. Rankings

This year, we have included annual global rankings of country performance for each of the categories of democratic performance—Representation, Rights, Rule of Law, and Participation—rather than classifying regimes on an overall basis.

The focus on category-level performance (rather than on something like regime types) allows for a more nuanced understanding of where democracy is thriving and where it is suffering. It also shifts the focus from the broad idea of democracy generally to specific and narrower aspects of democracy, which are more appropriate to target for reform and intervention.

Table B.1. Rankings for Participation

Country	Ranking 2022	Change in ranking between 2021 and 2022	Ranking 2021	Change in ranking between 2017 and 2022	Ranking 2017
Denmark	1	0	1	1	2
Finland	2	0	2	1	3
Ireland	3	0	3	4	7
Taiwan	4	3	7	8	12
Norway	5	-1	4	0	5
Switzerland	6	-1	5	-2	4
Iceland	7	2	9		
Uruguay	8	3	11	-2	6
Italy	9	-1	8	0	9
Germany	10	3	13	4	14
Belgium	11	1	12	2	13
United States	12	-2	10	-1	11
Sweden	13	-7	6	-12	1
Luxembourg	14	-1	13	-6	8
Costa Rica	15	4	19	0	15
Austria	16	4	20	-6	10
Canada	17	4	21	0	17
Argentina	18	4	22	6	24
Mauritius	19	10	29	3	22
Sierra Leone	20	-5	15	15	35
Senegal	21	7	28	23	44
Trinidad and Tobago	22	-4	18	-1	21
Indonesia	22	4	26	9	31
France	24	-7	17	8	32
United Kingdom	25	-2	23	-9	16
Netherlands	26	-1	25	4	30
Australia	27	-3	24	-3	24

Table B.1. Rankings for Participation (cont.)

Country	Ranking 2022	Change in ranking between 2021 and 2022	Ranking 2021	Change in ranking between 2017 and 2022	Ranking 2017
Chile	28	2	30	25	53
Ghana	29	3	32	-9	20
Mali	30	10	40	-11	19
Dominican Republic	31	11	42	44	75
Latvia	31	8	39	24	55
Greece	33	1	34	-6	27
Slovenia	34	14	48	-8	26
Cyprus	35	3	38	-7	28
New Zealand	36	-9	27	3	39
Brazil	37	3	40	10	47
Israel	38	-3	35	4	42
Barbados	39	-3	36	1	40
Estonia	39	4	43	10	49
Kenya	39	24	63	12	51
South Africa	42	2	44	-6	36
Burkina Faso	43	-28	15	-15	28
Spain	44	1	45	8	52
South Korea	45	0	45	-7	38
Zambia	46	40	86	36	82
Slovakia	47	-10	37	11	58
Czechia	48	1	49	-3	45
Suriname	49	1	50	-1	48
Fiji	50	4	54	36	86
Bolivia	51	0	51	-18	33
Japan	52	0	52	4	56
Gabon	53	0	53	-30	23
Botswana	53	-22	31	6	59

Table B.1. Rankings for Participation (cont.)

Country	Ranking 2022	Change in ranking between 2021 and 2022	Ranking 2021	Change in ranking between 2017 and 2022	Ranking 2017
Vanuatu	53	4	57	13	66
The Gambia	56	4	60	52	108
Lithuania	57	-1	56	5	62
Malta	58	-11	47	-15	43
Malawi	58	-26	32	5	63
Jamaica	60	10	70	-10	50
Benin	61	-2	59	-43	18
Niger	62	-4	58	-28	34
Ecuador	63	9	72	26	89
Togo	64	-2	62	23	87
Lebanon	65	5	70	4	69
Philippines	66	1	67	-5	61
Montenegro	67	-12	55	-21	46
Liberia	67	-3	64	-3	64
Portugal	69	7	76	-12	57
Nepal	69	4	73	2	71
Croatia	71	8	79	-7	64
Peru	72	-6	66	-12	60
Ukraine	73	13	86	36	109
Panama	74	0	74	-4	70
Armenia	75	6	81	26	101
Namibia	76	2	78	-23	53
Côte d'Ivoire	77	11	88	8	85
Sri Lanka	78	12	90	-37	41
Lesotho	79	-11	68	-5	74
Guinea-Bissau	80	-11	69	15	95
Pakistan	81	-6	75	2	83

Table B.1. Rankings for Participation (cont.)

Country	Ranking 2022	Change in ranking between 2021 and 2022	Ranking 2021	Change in ranking between 2017 and 2022	Ranking 2017
Bulgaria	82	-18	64	-5	77
Albania	83	9	92	13	96
India	83	0	83	-12	71
Colombia	85	17	102	-9	76
Guyana	86	5	91	-3	83
North Macedonia	87	-11	76	-16	71
Timor-Leste	87	14	101	10	97
Tanzania	89	-6	83	9	98
Guinea	90	-9	81	-23	67
Nigeria	90	-10	80	-23	67
Poland	92	-9	83	-11	81
Maldives	93	1	94	31	124
Georgia	94	2	96	5	99
Serbia	95	1	96	-17	78
Tunisia	95	-35	60	-58	37
Honduras	97	7	104	6	103
Kosovo	98	16	114	17	115
Moldova	99	9	108	14	113
Cameroon	100	12	112	4	104
Ethiopia	101	10	111	34	135
Zimbabwe	102	-13	89	-10	92
Mongolia	103	-4	99	-23	80
Malaysia	104	-4	100	-5	99
Uganda	105	-7	98	-26	79
Bosnia and Herzegovina	106	2	108	-15	91
Comoros	107	-1	106	-18	89
Morocco	108	2	110	3	111

Table B.1. Rankings for Participation (cont.)

Country	Ranking 2022	Change in ranking between 2021 and 2022	Ranking 2021	Change in ranking between 2017 and 2022	Ranking 2017
Cabo Verde	109	-2	107	-2	107
Kuwait	110	10	120	2	112
Democratic Republic of the Congo	111	-19	92	-17	94
Singapore	112	3	115	7	119
Bangladesh	113	0	113	-11	102
Papua New Guinea	113	3	116	25	138
Romania	115	-20	95	-1	114
Solomon Islands	115	2	117	-23	92
Madagascar	117	2	119	-13	104
Thailand	118	3	121	13	131
Jordan	119	-16	103	-9	110
Mauritania	120	-15	105	2	122
Sudan	121	9	130	28	149
Bhutan	122	-5	117	-2	120
Paraguay	123	4	127	4	127
Algeria	124	0	124	-3	121
Hungary	125	4	129	-8	117
El Salvador	126	-5	121	-38	88
Guatemala	127	-4	123	-23	104
Libya	127	10	137	16	143
Congo	129	5	134	15	144
Eswatini	129	3	132	10	139
Angola	131	10	141	20	151
Mexico	132	-5	127	-16	116
Palestine	133	-8	125	-8	125
Vietnam	133	-7	126	-4	129
Mozambique	135	-4	131	-9	126

Table B.1. Rankings for Participation (cont.)

Country	Ranking 2022	Change in ranking between 2021 and 2022	Ranking 2021	Change in ranking between 2017 and 2022	Ranking 2017
Kyrgyzstan	136	-3	133	-13	123
Iraq	137	2	139	-1	136
Central African Republic	138	2	140	-6	132
Türkiye	139	-1	138	-5	134
Haiti	140	-4	136	-13	127
Djibouti	141	1	142	1	142
Chad	142	-7	135	-10	132
Bahrain	143	1	144	6	149
Somalia	144	3	147	8	152
Venezuela	145	0	145	-4	141
Kazakhstan	146	3	149	8	154
Burundi	147	-4	143	-11	136
Uzbekistan	148	6	154	13	161
Iran	149	1	150	-2	147
Rwanda	150	1	151	-5	145
Russia	151	-3	148	-5	146
Nicaragua	152	0	152	-22	130
United Arab Emirates	153	2	155	5	158
China	154	4	158	1	155
Egypt	155	-2	153	1	156
Oman	155	4	159	1	156
Myanmar	157	-12	145	-39	118
Cambodia	158	-1	157	-10	148
Laos	159	3	162	6	165
Yemen	160	3	163	-1	159
Belarus	161	-1	160	-8	153
South Sudan	162	-1	161	-2	160

Table B.1. Rankings for Participation (cont.)

Country	Ranking 2022	Change in ranking between 2021 and 2022	Ranking 2021	Change in ranking between 2017 and 2022	Ranking 2017
Equatorial Guinea	163	1	164	-1	162
Qatar	164	2	166	3	167
Cuba	165	0	165	-1	164
Azerbaijan	166	3	169	2	168
Tajikistan	167	0	167	-1	166
Saudi Arabia	168	0	168	-5	163
Afghanistan	169	-13	156	-29	140
Syria	170	0	170	0	170
Turkmenistan	171	0	171	-2	169
North Korea	172	0	172	-1	171
Eritrea	173	0	173	-1	172

Table B.2. Rankings on Representation

Country	Ranking 2022	Change in ranking between 2021 and 2022	Ranking 2021	Change in ranking between 2017 and 2022	Ranking 2017
Sweden	1	0	1	3	4
Denmark	2	1	3	4	6
Estonia	3	3	6	-2	1
Chile	4	0	4	1	5
Netherlands	5	5	10	3	8
Germany	6	1	7	-4	2
Norway	7	4	11	7	14
Finland	8	0	8	4	12
Uruguay	9	-5	4	-2	7
France	10	3	13	5	15
Spain	10	5	15	11	21
New Zealand	12	0	12	-1	11
Costa Rica	13	-11	2	-4	9
Italy	14	3	17	4	18
Belgium	15	-1	14	-6	9
Australia	16	2	18	-3	13
Greece	17	1	18	7	24
Taiwan	17	3	20	2	19
United Kingdom	19	-3	16	4	23
Switzerland	20	2	22	2	22
Czechia	20	1	21	13	33
Portugal	22	-13	9	-19	3
Lithuania	23	0	23	-3	20
Canada	24	0	24	5	29
Ireland	25	0	25	1	26
Slovakia	26	1	27	2	28
Luxembourg	27	-1	26	-3	24

Table B.2. Rankings on Representation (cont.)

Country	Ranking 2022	Change in ranking between 2021 and 2022	Ranking 2021	Change in ranking between 2017 and 2022	Ranking 2017
Slovenia	27	8	35	-11	16
Japan	29	-1	28	-12	17
Croatia	30	0	30	8	38
South Korea	31	-2	29	-4	27
Jamaica	32	0	32	5	37
Austria	32	-1	31	0	32
Cyprus	34	-1	33	2	36
Cabo Verde	35	-1	34	-4	31
Panama	36	0	36	3	39
Iceland	37	0	37	-2	35
Israel	38	1	39	5	43
Romania	39	3	42	6	45
Trinidad and Tobago	40	1	41	1	41
Argentina	41	-3	38	5	46
Peru	42	-2	40	-2	40
Malta	43	0	43	1	44
Latvia	44	13	57	16	60
Brazil	45	0	45	-3	42
Bulgaria	46	5	51	3	49
Barbados	47	-3	44	1	48
Ghana	48	-2	46	-2	46
Suriname	49	-2	47	2	51
United States	50	-1	49	4	54
Moldova	51	-2	49	32	83
Vanuatu	51	-3	48	2	53
Ecuador	53	-1	52	26	79
South Africa	54	0	54	-2	52

Table B.2. Rankings on Representation (cont.)

Country	Ranking 2022	Change in ranking between 2021 and 2022	Ranking 2021	Change in ranking between 2017 and 2022	Ranking 2017
Timor-Leste	54	-1	53	3	57
Colombia	56	7	63	10	66
Malawi	57	-2	55	19	76
Poland	58	-3	55	-24	34
Lesotho	59	8	67	13	72
Indonesia	60	-1	59	-3	57
Nepal	61	8	69	10	71
Bhutan	62	-2	60	0	62
Mongolia	63	-5	58	-4	59
Namibia	64	-3	61	0	64
Dominican Republic	65	-1	64	23	88
India	66	-4	62	-16	50
Senegal	67	6	73	8	75
Albania	68	3	71	-1	67
Mexico	69	-2	67	4	73
North Macedonia	69	1	70	20	89
Sri Lanka	69	7	76	11	80
Mauritius	72	-7	65	-43	29
Kosovo	73	4	77	8	81
Paraguay	74	-2	72	-5	69
Liberia	75	0	75	2	77
Bolivia	76	5	81	2	78
The Gambia	77	5	82	22	99
Solomon Islands	78	-5	73	6	84
Armenia	79	-1	78	43	122
Zambia	79	4	83	31	110
Botswana	81	-3	78	-20	61

Table B.2. Rankings on Representation (cont.)

Country	Ranking 2022	Change in ranking between 2021 and 2022	Ranking 2021	Change in ranking between 2017 and 2022	Ranking 2017
Sierra Leone	82	-4	78	0	82
Montenegro	83	1	84	13	96
Maldives	83	3	86	30	113
Hungary	85	0	85	-18	67
Georgia	86	1	87	-16	70
Guyana	87	1	88	-24	63
Tunisia	88	-23	65	-33	55
Kenya	89	11	100	8	97
Philippines	89	0	89	-3	86
Honduras	91	5	96	23	114
Malaysia	92	17	109	29	121
Ukraine	93	-2	91	5	98
Niger	94	-1	93	1	95
El Salvador	95	-6	89	-30	65
Guatemala	96	-4	92	-23	73
Bosnia and Herzegovina	97	2	99	-5	92
Madagascar	98	-1	97	5	103
Nigeria	99	-2	97	-15	84
Fiji	100	4	104	1	101
Singapore	101	0	101	4	105
Kuwait	102	6	108	4	106
Papua New Guinea	103	3	106	1	104
Benin	104	-1	103	-48	56
Serbia	105	1	106	-18	87
Iraq	106	-4	102	-4	102
Côte d'Ivoire	107	-2	105	-16	91
Togo	108	1	109	1	109

Table B.2. Rankings on Representation (cont.)

Country	Ranking 2022	Change in ranking between 2021 and 2022	Ranking 2021	Change in ranking between 2017 and 2022	Ranking 2017
Lebanon	109	3	112	5	114
Pakistan	110	1	111	1	111
Tanzania	111	2	113	-17	94
Türkiye	112	2	114	0	112
Guinea-Bissau	113	-18	95	-13	100
Jordan	114	2	116	9	123
Morocco	115	0	115	4	119
Mauritania	116	1	117	20	136
Mozambique	117	2	119	0	117
Zimbabwe	118	1	119	10	128
Kyrgyzstan	119	-1	118	-1	118
Uganda	120	1	121	4	124
Rwanda	121	1	122	12	133
Angola	122	3	125	12	134
Algeria	122	0	122	9	131
Ethiopia	124	0	124	30	154
Bangladesh	125	1	126	0	125
Comoros	126	3	129	-33	93
Oman	126	1	127	1	127
Central African Republic	128	0	128	-2	126
Kazakhstan	129	2	131	17	146
Gabon	130	0	130	8	138
Thailand	130	5	135	34	164
Cameroon	132	2	134	7	139
Democratic Republic of the Congo	133	0	133	11	144
Djibouti	134	2	136	11	145
Egypt	135	2	137	8	143

Table B.2. Rankings on Representation (cont.)

Country	Ranking 2022	Change in ranking between 2021 and 2022	Ranking 2021	Change in ranking between 2017 and 2022	Ranking 2017
Russia	136	-4	132	5	141
Vietnam	137	3	140	10	147
Iran	138	1	139	-1	137
Eswatini	139	-1	138	12	151
Congo	140	4	144	9	149
Uzbekistan	140	0	140	16	156
Burundi	142	0	142	11	153
Cambodia	143	0	143	-8	135
Bahrain	144	1	145	5	149
Nicaragua	145	1	146	-5	140
Laos	146	2	148	14	160
Venezuela	147	0	147	-5	142
Azerbaijan	148	0	148	7	155
Cuba	149	1	150	10	159
Tajikistan	150	1	151	7	157
Equatorial Guinea	151	1	152	7	158
Belarus	152	1	153	0	152
Syria	153	2	155	9	162
Turkmenistan	154	0	154	7	161
North Korea	155	1	156	8	163
Qatar	156	1	157	8	164
Haiti	157	1	158	-43	114
Mali	157	1	158	-49	108
Guinea	157	1	158	-37	120
Burkina Faso	157	-64	93	-67	90
Chad	157	1	158	-9	148
Somalia	157	1	158	7	164

Table B.2. Rankings on Representation (cont.)

Country	Ranking 2022	Change in ranking between 2021 and 2022	Ranking 2021	Change in ranking between 2017 and 2022	Ranking 2017
Eritrea	157	1	158	7	164
Libya	157	1	158	-27	130
Sudan	157	1	158	-29	128
South Sudan	157	1	158	7	164
Palestine	157	1	158	7	164
Saudi Arabia	157	1	158	7	164
Yemen	157	1	158	7	164
United Arab Emirates	157	1	158	7	164
Afghanistan	157	1	158	-25	132
China	157	1	158	7	164
Myanmar	157	1	158	-50	107

Table B.3. Ranking on Rights

Country	Ranking 2022	Change in ranking between 2021 and 2022	Ranking 2021	Change in ranking between 2017 and 2022	Ranking 2017
Denmark	1	0	1	0	1
Germany	2	0	2	0	2
Switzerland	3	0	3	1	4
Belgium	4	2	6	1	5
Norway	5	2	7	-2	3
Luxembourg	6	-2	4	0	6
Finland	7	-2	5	1	8
Sweden	7	1	8	0	7
Australia	9	0	9	0	9
Czechia	10	1	11	12	22
Iceland	11	-1	10	1	12
Ireland	12	0	12	-2	10
New Zealand	13	3	16	2	15
Italy	14	0	14	-2	12
Spain	15	-2	13	9	24
Japan	16	1	17	2	18
Netherlands	17	-2	15	-6	11
Estonia	18	0	18	1	19
Latvia	19	0	19	11	30
Costa Rica	20	0	20	7	27
Lithuania	20	5	25	1	21
Taiwan	22	-1	21	4	26
Canada	23	0	23	-3	20
Austria	24	-3	21	-8	16
Slovenia	24	12	36	-10	14
Greece	26	-2	24	-3	23
France	27	-1	26	-10	17

Table B.3. Ranking on Rights (cont.)

Country	Ranking 2022	Change in ranking between 2021 and 2022	Ranking 2021	Change in ranking between 2017 and 2022	Ranking 2017
United States	28	1	29	5	33
Malta	29	5	34	6	35
Cyprus	30	-2	28	-6	24
Portugal	31	0	31	0	31
Chile	32	7	39	5	37
Slovakia	33	-6	27	1	34
United Kingdom	34	-2	32	-6	28
South Korea	35	-3	32	-3	32
Jamaica	36	1	37	9	45
Israel	37	-7	30	-1	36
Uruguay	38	-3	35	-9	29
Barbados	39	-1	38	-1	38
Croatia	40	0	40	1	41
Trinidad and Tobago	41	0	41	-2	39
Bulgaria	42	2	44	6	48
Vanuatu	43	14	57	16	59
Hungary	44	-1	43	-2	42
Singapore	45	1	46	2	47
South Africa	46	2	48	5	51
Argentina	47	1	48	6	53
Albania	48	-2	46	6	54
Georgia	49	4	53	12	61
Tunisia	50	0	50	1	51
Romania	51	-9	42	-1	50
Armenia	52	7	59	38	90
Moldova	53	0	53	17	70
Poland	54	4	58	-14	40

Table B.3. Ranking on Rights (cont.)

Country	Ranking 2022	Change in ranking between 2021 and 2022	Ranking 2021	Change in ranking between 2017 and 2022	Ranking 2017
Montenegro	55	1	56	2	57
Serbia	56	-1	55	7	63
Suriname	57	-13	44	1	58
Senegal	58	2	60	-3	55
Panama	59	6	65	6	65
The Gambia	60	7	67	14	74
Cabo Verde	61	1	62	-12	49
Namibia	62	-1	61	-2	60
Bhutan	63	-12	51	4	67
Ghana	64	-2	62	-18	46
Botswana	64	-12	52	-8	56
Mauritius	66	-2	64	-22	44
Mongolia	67	-1	66	-5	62
Guyana	68	0	68	-4	64
Benin	69	3	72	-26	43
Lesotho	70	1	71	7	77
Nepal	71	3	74	-2	69
North Macedonia	72	-4	68	-4	68
Malawi	73	3	76	2	75
Sierra Leone	74	3	77	34	108
Bosnia and Herzegovina	75	7	82	-3	72
Ecuador	76	-1	75	10	86
Tanzania	76	8	84	12	88
Ukraine	78	0	78	0	78
Solomon Islands	78	2	80	22	100
Malaysia	80	1	81	29	109
Peru	81	-2	79	-2	79

Table B.3. Ranking on Rights (cont.)

Country	Ranking 2022	Change in ranking between 2021 and 2022	Ranking 2021	Change in ranking between 2017 and 2022	Ranking 2017
Morocco	82	2	84	-1	81
Gabon	83	0	83	-3	80
Dominican Republic	84	2	86	14	98
Brazil	84	-11	73	-18	66
Liberia	86	2	88	-5	81
Kosovo	87	1	88	10	97
Kenya	88	4	92	14	102
Sri Lanka	88	-18	70	-2	86
Philippines	90	1	91	-14	76
Colombia	91	7	98	1	92
Niger	91	-1	90	-18	73
Fiji	93	1	94	-8	85
Indonesia	94	6	100	-11	83
Timor-Leste	95	1	96	18	113
Paraguay	96	1	97	13	109
Bolivia	97	2	99	1	98
Maldives	98	-5	93	37	135
Kuwait	99	-4	95	-5	94
Jordan	100	-13	87	-12	88
Papua New Guinea	101	2	103	17	118
Kazakhstan	102	4	106	5	107
Honduras	103	12	115	20	123
Zimbabwe	104	-1	103	-8	96
India	104	-3	101	-11	93
Zambia	106	9	115	0	106
Lebanon	106	-1	105	-2	104
Palestine	108	0	108	-37	71

Table B.3. Ranking on Rights (cont.)

Country	Ranking 2022	Change in ranking between 2021 and 2022	Ranking 2021	Change in ranking between 2017 and 2022	Ranking 2017
Côte d'Ivoire	109	2	111	-4	105
Ethiopia	110	-8	102	23	133
Mozambique	111	2	113	-2	109
Nigeria	112	0	112	-18	94
Burkina Faso	113	1	114	-29	84
Mexico	114	-7	107	-2	112
Algeria	115	-5	110	-12	103
Angola	116	3	119	15	131
Oman	117	3	120	3	120
Rwanda	118	-1	117	4	122
Thailand	118	4	122	18	136
Mali	120	-11	109	-6	114
Madagascar	121	0	121	-4	117
United Arab Emirates	122	2	124	8	130
Kyrgyzstan	122	-5	117	-21	101
Uganda	124	-1	123	-8	116
Qatar	125	5	130	-1	124
Vietnam	126	5	131	5	131
Togo	127	0	127	-6	121
Djibouti	128	6	134	9	137
Türkiye	129	0	129	-1	128
Guinea-Bissau	130	-3	127	3	133
Uzbekistan	131	0	131	16	147
Guatemala	132	-1	131	-5	127
Russia	133	-9	124	-9	124
China	134	2	136	3	137
Bangladesh	134	4	138	5	139

Table B.3. Ranking on Rights (cont.)

Country	Ranking 2022	Change in ranking between 2021 and 2022	Ranking 2021	Change in ranking between 2017 and 2022	Ranking 2017
Pakistan	136	-1	135	9	145
El Salvador	137	-11	126	-22	115
Cameroon	138	1	139	3	141
Eswatini	139	1	140	1	140
Comoros	140	-3	137	-21	119
Egypt	141	0	141	3	144
Venezuela	142	-1	141	0	142
Azerbaijan	143	1	144	5	148
Cuba	144	3	147	-2	142
Iraq	145	1	146	8	153
Laos	146	9	155	13	159
Guinea	147	3	150	3	150
Belarus	148	-3	145	-57	91
Mauritania	149	-6	143	-3	146
Bahrain	149	2	151	13	162
Central African Republic	151	-2	149	3	154
Burundi	152	4	156	11	163
Sudan	153	0	153	11	164
Saudi Arabia	154	3	157	3	157
Iran	155	-3	152	-6	149
Democratic Republic of the Congo	156	4	160	3	159
Cambodia	157	1	158	-5	152
Congo	158	-4	154	0	158
Libya	159	0	159	-3	156
Haiti	160	-12	148	-10	150
Myanmar	161	2	163	-33	128

Table B.3. Ranking on Rights (cont.)

Country	Ranking 2022	Change in ranking between 2021 and 2022	Ranking 2021	Change in ranking between 2017 and 2022	Ranking 2017
Equatorial Guinea	162	0	162	3	165
Chad	163	-3	160	-2	161
Nicaragua	164	-1	163	-40	124
Tajikistan	165	2	167	1	166
Somalia	166	0	166	1	167
South Sudan	167	-2	165	1	168
North Korea	168	3	171	2	170
Turkmenistan	169	0	169	0	169
Eritrea	170	3	173	3	173
Yemen	171	1	172	1	172
Syria	172	-3	169	-1	171
Afghanistan	173	-5	168	-18	155

Table B.4. Rankings on Rule of Law

Country	Ranking 2022	Change in ranking between 2021 and 2022	Ranking 2021	Change in ranking between 2017 and 2022	Ranking 2017
Denmark	1	7	8	1	2
Norway	2	-1	1	-1	1
Germany	3	-1	2	0	3
Switzerland	4	0	4	6	10
Sweden	5	-2	3	0	5
Finland	6	0	6	6	12
Australia	7	-2	5	0	7
Luxembourg	8	1	9	1	9
Estonia	9	-2	7	-5	4
New Zealand	10	1	11	-2	8
Ireland	11	-1	10	4	15
Singapore	12	0	12	1	13
Belgium	13	0	13	3	16
Latvia	14	5	19	16	30
Canada	15	0	15	-2	13
United Kingdom	15	3	18	-9	6
Taiwan	15	6	21	14	29
Netherlands	18	-4	14	-7	11
Japan	18	-2	16	3	21
France	20	0	20	-1	19
Iceland	21	-4	17	-4	17
Spain	22	1	23	-2	20
Czechia	23	11	34	9	32
Uruguay	24	0	24	-6	18
Costa Rica	25	0	25	1	26
Israel	25	4	29	8	33
Chile	27	-1	26	-2	25

Table B.4. Rankings on Rule of Law (cont.)

Country	Ranking 2022	Change in ranking between 2021 and 2022	Ranking 2021	Change in ranking between 2017 and 2022	Ranking 2017
South Korea	28	-6	22	-1	27
United States	29	-2	27	2	31
Slovenia	30	11	41	-6	24
Lithuania	31	-1	30	3	34
Slovakia	32	-1	31	6	38
Cyprus	33	-1	32	-5	28
Portugal	34	-1	33	-12	22
Italy	35	0	35	1	36
Austria	36	-8	28	-13	23
Barbados	37	-1	36	0	37
Bhutan	38	-1	37	-3	35
Malta	39	0	39	4	43
Trinidad and Tobago	40	8	48	0	40
Greece	41	-3	38	-2	39
Jamaica	42	-2	40	7	49
Croatia	43	1	44	2	45
United Arab Emirates	43	-1	42	1	44
Botswana	45	1	46	-4	41
Vanuatu	45	-3	42	5	50
Namibia	47	0	47	-6	41
Bulgaria	48	7	55	10	58
Montenegro	49	-5	44	-1	48
Cabo Verde	50	-1	49	-3	47
Romania	51	1	52	19	70
Tanzania	51	5	56	10	61
Argentina	53	-2	51	4	57
Senegal	54	-1	53	-1	53

Table B.4. Rankings on Rule of Law (cont.)

Country	Ranking 2022	Change in ranking between 2021 and 2022	Ranking 2021	Change in ranking between 2017 and 2022	Ranking 2017
Malawi	54	-4	50	25	79
Moldova	56	15	71	38	94
Serbia	57	5	62	3	60
Maldives	58	1	59	64	122
South Africa	59	0	59	14	73
Kosovo	60	5	65	11	71
Poland	61	0	61	-9	52
Georgia	62	1	63	-7	55
The Gambia	63	4	67	6	69
Hungary	64	-6	58	-18	46
Kuwait	65	14	79	15	80
Panama	66	0	66	-7	59
Timor-Leste	67	1	68	16	83
Benin	68	-5	63	-15	53
Mongolia	68	-12	56	-4	64
Suriname	70	9	79	15	85
Malaysia	71	8	79	18	89
Kenya	72	1	73	19	91
Colombia	73	20	93	-7	66
Armenia	74	-5	69	33	107
India	74	2	76	-12	62
Oman	76	6	82	1	77
Albania	77	8	85	-4	73
Zambia	78	21	99	12	90
Jordan	79	3	82	13	92
Lesotho	80	-2	78	7	87
Tunisia	81	-27	54	-25	56

Table B.4. Rankings on Rule of Law (cont.)

Country	Ranking 2022	Change in ranking between 2021 and 2022	Ranking 2021	Change in ranking between 2017 and 2022	Ranking 2017
Ecuador	82	-5	77	1	83
Peru	83	-10	73	-20	63
Guyana	84	-9	75	-19	65
Solomon Islands	84	5	89	2	86
Dominican Republic	86	0	86	29	115
Burkina Faso	86	-14	72	-4	82
Mauritius	88	-18	70	-37	51
Sierra Leone	89	-5	84	11	100
Bosnia and Herzegovina	90	4	94	-12	78
Ghana	91	-3	88	-19	72
North Macedonia	92	4	96	-12	80
Brazil	93	-4	89	-25	68
Nepal	94	-2	92	-19	75
Sri Lanka	95	6	101	-29	66
Bolivia	96	-5	91	-4	92
Indonesia	97	-2	95	-21	76
Niger	98	-11	87	-10	88
Fiji	99	-2	97	-1	98
Togo	100	-2	98	19	119
Honduras	101	14	115	23	124
Paraguay	102	-2	100	3	105
Gabon	103	-1	102	3	106
Philippines	104	-1	103	-1	103
Liberia	105	2	107	-3	102
Morocco	106	0	106	4	110
Mexico	107	0	107	-10	97
Mozambique	107	7	114	7	114

Table B.4. Rankings on Rule of Law (cont.)

Country	Ranking 2022	Change in ranking between 2021 and 2022	Ranking 2021	Change in ranking between 2017 and 2022	Ranking 2017
Côte d'Ivoire	109	1	110	-15	94
Papua New Guinea	110	-5	105	-1	109
Rwanda	111	-8	103	-13	98
Ukraine	112	5	117	19	131
Qatar	112	-3	109	-8	104
Uzbekistan	114	-1	113	27	141
Kazakhstan	115	3	118	17	132
Vietnam	116	-6	110	-4	112
Algeria	117	4	121	4	121
Kyrgyzstan	117	-5	112	-21	96
Madagascar	119	-3	116	15	134
Uganda	120	-1	119	-10	110
Angola	121	5	126	18	139
Pakistan	121	7	128	9	130
Ethiopia	123	1	124	12	135
Djibouti	124	4	128	4	128
Iran	124	-1	123	-7	117
Nigeria	126	-1	125	-2	124
Palestine	127	-7	120	-19	108
Laos	128	4	132	17	145
Saudi Arabia	129	2	131	-2	127
China	130	0	130	-10	120
Guatemala	131	-10	121	-15	116
Mali	132	1	133	-3	129
Russia	133	-6	127	0	133
Thailand	133	3	136	13	146
Bangladesh	135	7	142	8	143

Table B.4. Rankings on Rule of Law (cont.)

Country	Ranking 2022	Change in ranking between 2021 and 2022	Ranking 2021	Change in ranking between 2017 and 2022	Ranking 2017
Comoros	136	1	137	-18	118
El Salvador	137	-2	135	-36	101
Lebanon	138	1	139	-12	126
Mauritania	139	-5	134	3	142
Bahrain	140	0	140	8	148
Guinea-Bissau	141	-3	138	-5	136
Guinea	142	-1	141	-5	137
Iraq	143	1	144	7	150
Azerbaijan	144	6	150	13	157
Zimbabwe	145	-2	143	2	147
Burundi	146	5	151	20	166
Egypt	147	0	147	5	152
Türkiye	148	1	149	3	151
Eswatini	149	-3	146	-9	140
Congo	150	1	151	10	160
Cuba	151	3	154	3	154
Cameroon	152	1	153	0	152
Democratic Republic of the Congo	153	-8	145	12	165
Sudan	154	-6	148	2	156
Central African Republic	155	1	156	-6	149
Cambodia	156	2	158	2	158
Myanmar	157	2	159	-45	112
Haiti	158	-1	157	-3	155
Belarus	158	2	160	-35	123
Tajikistan	160	4	164	1	161
Somalia	161	2	163	-2	159
North Korea	162	0	162	1	163

Table B.4. Rankings on Rule of Law (cont.)

Country	Ranking 2022	Change in ranking between 2021 and 2022	Ranking 2021	Change in ranking between 2017 and 2022	Ranking 2017
Equatorial Guinea	163	-2	161	0	163
Eritrea	164	3	167	9	173
Nicaragua	165	1	166	-21	144
Turkmenistan	166	2	168	-4	162
South Sudan	167	4	171	4	171
Chad	168	1	169	-1	167
Libya	168	2	170	0	168
Yemen	170	2	172	0	170
Syria	171	-7	164	1	172
Afghanistan	172	-17	155	-34	138
Venezuela	173	0	173	-4	169

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International IDEA
Strömsborg
SE-103 34 Stockholm
Sweden
+46 8 698 37 00
info@idea.int
www.idea.int

The global state of democracy in 2023 is complex, fluid and unequal. Across every region of the world, democracy has continued to contract, with declines in at least one indicator of democratic performance in half of the countries covered in the Report. Measured in terms of the areas of improvement and decline within each country, 2022 was the sixth consecutive year in which more countries experienced net declines in democratic processes than net improvements. In short, democracy is still in trouble, stagnant at best, and declining in many places. But there are a few green shoots of hope (notably, corruption falling and surprisingly high levels of political participation). Indeed, while *The Global State of Democracy 2023* shows some declines in countries that had been thought to be healthy democracies, at the same time there were encouraging improvements in countries where the level of oppression has been constant for years.

Against this background, this year's Report highlights the role of so-called countervailing institutions in stopping the erosion of democratic institutions and reacting to the entrenchment of authoritarian forces. The term goes beyond the traditional understanding of 'checks and balances' to encompass those governmental and non-governmental institutions, organizations and movements that check the aggrandizement of power and balance the distribution of power to ensure that decision makers regularly integrate popular priorities into policy. Countervailing institutions include relatively new entities, such as human rights organizations and electoral management bodies, as well as civil society networks, popular movements and investigative journalists, which all play an irreplaceable role in ensuring democracy continues to be of and by the people.

What can be done to address the threats to democracy, both acute and chronic? *The Global State of Democracy 2023* policy recommendations include: support for electoral processes, focusing on mechanisms that guarantee fair contests and participation; transparency and access to information in legislatures that would multiply the sources of accountability; full commitment from governments to protect civic space; and legal protections for the independence of institutions that protect elections, investigate corruption and supervise government programmes.

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