

VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE BARS

Political imprisonment, civil death, and
the consequences of democratic erosion



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This report was made possible through the generous support of Peter Brown and Peggy Hamburg, Maureen and Robert Decherd, Julie Farkas and Seth Goldman, Harvey V. Fineberg and Mary E. Wilson, Gideon Foundation, Donald Graham and Amanda Bennett, Hitchcock Hoagland Foundation, John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, the Peter Mackler Award, Alfred Moses, and Margaret Shapiro. Freedom House is committed to editorial independence. Our donors do not influence the organization’s research priorities, report findings, or policy recommendations.

Freedom House is solely responsible for this report’s content.

Shannon O’Toole edited the report. Noelle Rojas provided research support. Annie Boyajian, Margaux Ewen, Yana Gorokhovskaia, Katie LaRoque, Nate Schenkkan, and Adrian Shahbaz provided valuable guidance throughout this project.

Finally, none of this would have been possible without the country experts who agreed to speak with us about political imprisonment, other restrictions faced by government opponents and critics, and wider democratic erosion. Their insights were integral to the success of this project.

ON THE COVER

Illustration by Mitch Blunt

Key findings

1

Political imprisonment is a key tool for limiting dissent, and accompanies wider democratic erosion. Prison sentences, detentions, and prosecutions against government opponents surged during times of political tension in six countries that have experienced recent democratic decline: Nicaragua, Tanzania, Thailand, Tunisia, Turkey, and Venezuela. Those targeted may be held behind bars for prolonged periods of time without formal sentencing, preventing them from engaging in opposition politics, journalism, and human rights work. In addition to a physical toll, imprisonment also carries heavy psychological and financial costs that can extend to prisoners' families.

2

For every political prisoner behind bars, many more government opponents face subtler constraints amounting to “civil death.” Antidemocratic leaders have targeted dissidents and government critics with other forms of repression that prevent them from doing their work and participating normally in society—a condition experts call “civil death.” Tactics of civil death include control over travel, physical monitoring, blacklisting, and seizure of assets. These restrictions usually occur in combination, and can be enacted through official and unofficial means, by state and nonstate actors. We observed combined restrictions amounting to civil death in each of the six countries under study.

3

Subservient judiciaries facilitate political imprisonment and civil death at the behest of autocratic regimes. Leaders able to gain control of the judiciary can use the courts as powerful tools of repression. Targeted individuals also lose access to critical mechanisms for recourse and accountability when the judiciary acts in the interests of the executive. Independently minded members of the judiciary are themselves at risk of becoming targets of state persecution, and their removal and replacement with loyalists further erodes the institution.

4

Countering political imprisonment and civil death is crucial in the fight for freedom. Political imprisonment and civil death empower illiberal leaders by removing their most vigorous and effective critics from society. These tactics can take place in countries that are experiencing democratic erosion, but have not hardened into authoritarian regimes. Monitoring for political imprisonment and civil death tactics, and taking action when they are present, are critical in the fight to counter authoritarianism, support agents of democratic change, and prevent future waves of repression.

Visible and Invisible Bars: Political imprisonment, civil death, and the consequences of democratic erosion

By Amy Slipowitz and Mina Loldj

The state does not lack imagination in trying to intimidate people into being quiet.¹

—Tanzanian civil society activist

An opposition leader is behind bars, accused of a host of bogus crimes ahead of national elections. A teenager is charged with defaming the monarchy after calling for democratic change in her country. She is blocked from returning to school after being released from detention on bail. A human rights defender, as he attempts to travel abroad for work, learns he is under investigation for terrorism and has been placed under a travel ban. His colleague has been languishing in pretrial detention for more than a year. A judge is dismissed after the president of her country suspends the parliament; her state pension and health insurance are then frozen.

These are only a handful of examples of how undemocratic regimes prevent real and perceived opponents—including human rights defenders, journalists, political activists, opposition leaders, civil servants, government defectors, protesters, and ordinary people—from leading their lives. The most visible tactic is political imprisonment, whether through politicized prosecutions and prison sentences, or pretrial measures that can keep individuals detained for months or years before their cases are resolved.

But for every political prisoner behind bars, many more government opponents and critics face subtler constraints, amounting to what some experts call “civil death.” While the term has different meanings in different fields of study,² Freedom House focuses on civil death as a condition where opponents are deprived of the ability to participate in society through some combination of repressive methods including control over travel, physical monitoring, blacklisting, and seizure of assets. In practice, these methods can manifest

through travel bans and confiscated passports, police posted outside someone’s home for all the neighbors to see, difficulty finding or retaining a job due to social stigma or blacklisting, expulsion from university, seizure of property, and freezing of bank accounts. They can be connected to conditions for release from political detention or imprisonment, or be imposed on their own, whether on official orders or through societal pressure. Targets often face more than one method simultaneously, with the suffocating accumulation of effects preventing them from working or living a normal life.

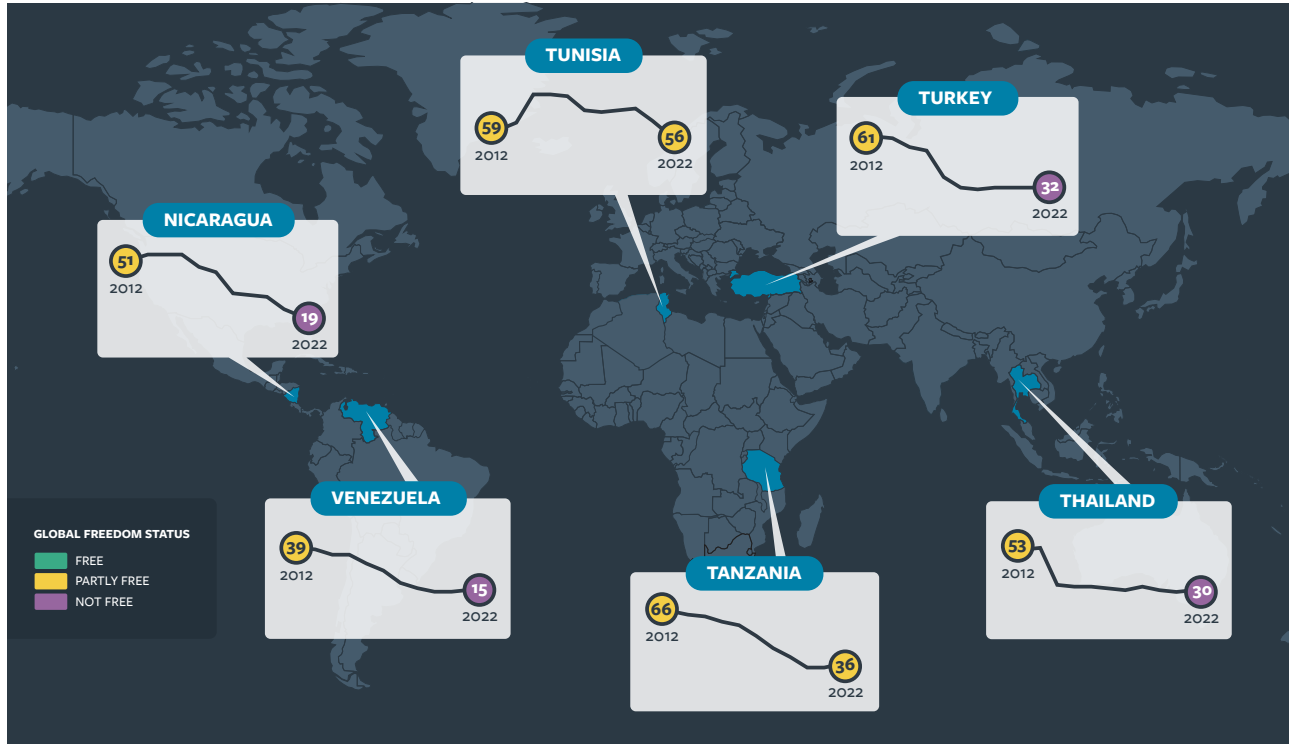
Political imprisonment and, to some extent, repressive tactics that cause civil death, garner significant attention in regimes with long histories of authoritarianism, such as China, Iran, and North Korea. But, use of these strategies to punish and silence opponents and critics is also pronounced in environments that have more recently experienced democratic erosion. Through our research, we sought to understand how aspiring or recent autocratic leaders suppress individual opponents, and how those methods manifest during periods of democratic degradation. This report examines such dynamics in six countries that underwent significant democratic decline within the last 20 years: Nicaragua, Tanzania, Thailand, Tunisia, Turkey, and Venezuela.

The report is based on interviews with 42 country experts, supplemented by desk research. Among those interviewed were civil society actors, human rights defenders, journalists, researchers, and academics; several of them have endured political imprisonment and elements of civil death themselves. Quotations have been lightly edited for clarity.

Political imprisonment has helped to limit dissent amid a wider environment of democratic erosion in each of the

SIGNIFICANT DEMOCRATIC EROSION

Each of the countries examined in this report experienced democratic decline in recent years, according to *Freedom in the World* analysis.



Note: All scores are on a scale of 0 to 100. Thailand was rated Partly Free in 2019, before reverting to Not Free the following year. Tunisia was rated Free between 2014 and 2020.

six countries under review. Additionally, we observed that tactics contributing to civil death—control over travel, physical monitoring, blacklisting, and seizure of assets—have also occurred in all six countries. Political imprisonment and measures of civil death have accompanied undemocratic power grabs, mass antigovernment demonstrations, and election campaigns. Moreover, they are wielded in countries that have yet to harden into authoritarian systems; their use did not begin upon reaching the depths of authoritarianism (and some have yet to reach them) but rather at points when each country was rated Partly Free or Free by [Freedom in the World](#), Freedom House’s annual report on political rights and civil liberties. We find that political imprisonment and civil death occur in parallel with democratic degradation.

The risk that these tactics will be wielded against democracy’s most strident defenders, who are bravely working in

countries around the world experiencing democratic erosion, is serious and concerning. In addition to effectively removing opponents and dissidents from society, political imprisonment and civil death can have devastating physical, psychological, and economic effects for those targeted, as well as for their loved ones. Yet opportunities for recourse and accountability are limited, as pliant judicial systems support unjust confinement, and judges themselves can become targets if they do not toe the line.

“Any sort of tool that they could use to control society, they do,” said Christopher Hernandez-Roy, the deputy director and senior fellow of the Americas Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, who has documented severe human rights abuses amid mass repression in Venezuela.³ Still, a wide range of actors continue to bravely push back against authoritarianism.

About the report

As part of Freedom House’s work to help free political prisoners and push back against the jailing of activists as a tool of repression, this report examines the use of political imprisonment as a tactic used by autocrats and aspiring autocrats to punish and silence their opponents and critics during periods of democratic decline. It also examines constraints on these individuals beyond bars. We chose to cover six geographically representative countries that had notable cases of political imprisonment in recent years and that *Freedom in the World* classified as electoral democracies within the last two decades but have since lost that status: Nicaragua, Tanzania, Thailand, Tunisia, Turkey, and Venezuela.

“Political imprisonment” is used in this report as a shorthand for politicized prison sentences, as well as politicized detentions, prosecutions, and investigations against real or perceived government opponents or critics. The term “government opponent” includes critics and those voicing dissent.

In addition to examining trends in political imprisonment, the report explores the concept of “civil death.” Several experts interviewed by Freedom House used the term while discussing conditions in Nicaragua and Turkey. The concept has been applied differently across a variety of contexts in literature and in other reports. These include conditions for government opponents and critics in authoritarian settings, analysis of contemporary and antiquated law that used the term, and discrimination against people with disabilities or certain diseases. In this report, Freedom House focuses on civil death’s use to deprive opponents from participating in society through

some combination of restrictive methods. Though not an exhaustive list, we have broadly categorized these methods into four categories: control over travel, physical monitoring, blacklisting, and seizure of assets.

The time periods covered in this report are limited to relatively recent developments: the presidency of Nicaragua’s Daniel Ortega since 2007, especially since a 2018 crackdown on antigovernment demonstrations; the presidency of Tanzania’s John Magufuli between 2015 and 2021; the period following Thailand’s 2014 military coup and into the 2020–21 prodemocracy protests; the aftermath of Tunisian president Kaïs Saïed’s suspension of the parliament in 2021; Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s rule over Turkey, especially since the 2013 Gezi Park protests; and the Chávez and Maduro presidencies in Venezuela, particularly after the emergence of mass repression in 2014. Conditions in certain parts of these countries—such as Zanzibar in Tanzania, and southern Thailand—differ significantly from those in the rest of the country; cases from these regions were therefore not included in the analysis.

Between June and August 2023, Freedom House conducted 42 interviews with a range of country experts. They included civil society actors, human rights defenders, journalists, researchers, and academics; several of them have endured political imprisonment and elements of civil death themselves. Interview transcripts were analyzed and annotated between August and October 2023. The contents of the report are based on these interviews, as well as desk research conducted between April and June 2023.

About *Free Them All: The Fred Hiatt Program to Free Political Prisoners*

This report was produced under *Free Them All: The Fred Hiatt Program to Free Political Prisoners*, which is named in honor of pathbreaking American journalist and former *Washington Post* editorial page editor Fred Hiatt.

Hiatt, who served as the editor of the *Washington Post* editorial page since 2000, was an outstanding journalist and a tireless advocate for democracy and human rights.

Under his leadership, the *Post*’s editorial and opinion pages became a beacon for the world’s human rights activists and a formidable platform for challenging despots and autocrats globally. Hiatt’s commitment to these causes was not just professional but deeply personal, as evidenced by his relentless campaign to demand accountability for the murder of *Post* journalist Jamal Khashoggi by Saudi authorities.

[Visit our website to learn more](#) about Fred Hiatt and how to donate to the initiative.

Visible bars: Political imprisonment amid declining democracy

They arrested famous politicians, leaders of the political parties, judges and lawyers. Who am I? I could disappear, and nobody will even hear about me.⁴

–Civil society actor

Politicized prison sentences, detentions, and prosecutions occur around the world, but their use is not limited to the most hardened authoritarian regimes. These tactics have been documented in places experiencing many forms of democratic erosion, as illustrated in each of the six cases that Freedom House examined for this study. We found that imprisonment emerges amid both sudden and gradual dismantling of democratic institutions, with significant physical, psychological, and financial impacts on the imprisoned and those near to them.

Escalations of political imprisonment

Power grabs, including through coups d'état, often feature harsh campaigns of political imprisonment that significantly raise the costs of challenging undemocratic actions. In Thailand, which has been plagued by military coups,⁵ hundreds of people including politicians, journalists, and activists were placed in military detention after the most recent putsch in 2014. Typically held for up to seven days, this tactic was known as “attitude adjustment.”⁶ Following significant democratic progress in Tunisia in the decade that followed Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali’s ouster, President Kaïs Saïed in July 2021 suspended the parliament, ultimately dissolving it the following year, dismantled the country’s newly democratic institutions, and held a constitutional referendum that strengthened executive power. Since Saïed’s power grab, at least eight leaders of major opposition parties have been held in pretrial detention on unsubstantiated national security charges, journalists and human rights defenders have been detained under a repressive new cybercrime law, and businesspeople, lawyers, and others have found themselves implicated in vague “conspiracy” cases.⁷

Failed coups have also spurred democratic erosion alongside political imprisonment. After an attempted coup



A demonstrator is detained in Caracas in July 2017 during a strike against Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro and his government. (Image Credit: Marco Bello/Reuters)

in 2016, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan pushed through a constitutional reform that effectively turned Turkey into a country ruled by presidential decree. The new powers have enabled Erdoğan to imprison and detain virtually anyone who poses a threat: “Whoever is being effective, you go after them,” said a Turkish civil society actor.⁸ Journalists, opposition members, and academics are among those who have faced lengthy pretrial detention and harsh prison sentences.⁹

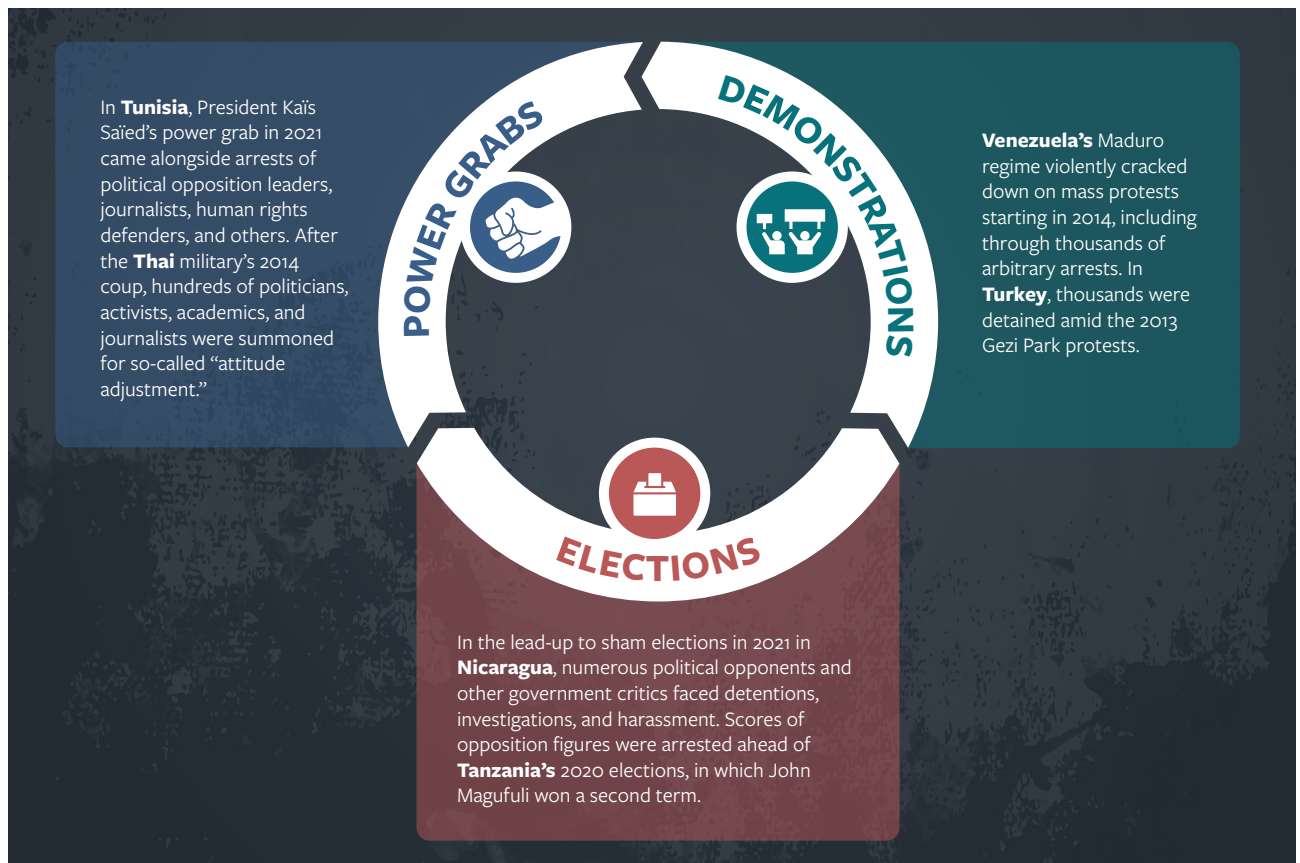
Long-lasting regimes that have not hardened into fully authoritarian systems also employ political imprisonment, with rates of detentions varying over time. In Tanzania, the 2015 presidential victory of John Magufuli, the candidate of the Chama cha Mapinduzi (CCM) party that has dominated politics for decades, in an unusually close election ushered in an unprecedented period of repression targeting the political opposition, media, civil society, and anyone else seen as

posing a challenge to the regime. New and preexisting laws were used to target opponents, including an act regulating political parties and a ban on political rallies selectively applied to the opposition that resulted in arrests.¹⁰

Resistance to growing authoritarian rule in Nicaragua and Venezuela prompted violent crackdowns, including mass arbitrary detentions, that were made possible after the systematic dismantling of democratic institutions and consolidation of executive power. Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez laid the groundwork for large-scale political imprisonment by his successor, Nicolás Maduro, including by packing the courts and through various new legislation. While Chávez did not jail his opponents frequently,¹¹ Maduro significantly escalated the use of political imprisonment and wide-scale violence, particularly amid mass antigovernment protests in 2014, 2017, and 2019.¹² “With Maduro, what we saw was a return to systematic classic repression—arbitrary arrest,

CATALYSTS FOR POLITICAL IMPRISONMENT

Specific events amid wider democratic erosion, such as power grabs, demonstrations, and elections, can spur increased rates of political imprisonment.



abuse on the streets, no due process, torture in detention,” Tamara Taraciuk Broner, Rule of Law Program director for Inter-American Dialogue, told Freedom House.¹³ According to the nongovernmental organization Foro Penal, nearly 16,000 people were politically imprisoned in Venezuela between January 2014 and December 2022. In comparison, the organization reported that there were just 11 political prisoners at the time of Chávez’s death in 2013.¹⁴

Democratic erosion in Nicaragua accelerated following Daniel Ortega’s election to the presidency in 2006. Ortega, who has increasingly sought to consolidate power, oversaw a violent crackdown after a government proposal to reduce pensions erupted into mass antigovernment demonstrations in April 2018; over 1,900 people had been arrested by mid-year, including opposition political leaders and activists, academics, and journalists.¹⁵ Arrests have since continued, surging once again in the lead-up to a sham presidential election in 2021.¹⁶ In its March 2023 report, the UN Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua said it had reasonable grounds to believe that violations and abuses committed since 2018, ordered by Ortega’s administration, were consistent with crimes against humanity.¹⁷

Leaders have ramped up political imprisonments in response to other, largely peaceful demonstrations, minimizing opportunities for further dissent. Large, youth-driven prodemocracy protests in Thailand in 2020 and 2021 that emerged partly in response to a court decision to dissolve a major opposition party¹⁸ were met with a slew of arrests: by August 2023, nearly 2,000 people reportedly faced criminal charges in connection with the demonstrations.¹⁹ In Turkey, police violently suppressed the 2013 Gezi Park protests, which began in opposition to the demolition of a park but escalated into nationwide antigovernment demonstrations.²⁰ While thousands of people were initially detained, what became known as “the Gezi trials” culminated in 2022 with the conviction of eight activists for a conspiratorial set of allegations; five of them remained in prison as of November 2023.²¹

The imprisonment of activists, dissidents, journalists, and others who challenge government abuses has severe consequences for the health of a country’s democracy. Their effective removal from society allows authoritarian and authoritarian-leaning leaders to commit abuses with less scrutiny, and those who remain free may become less likely to speak out due to credible fears that they might be jailed next. “Sometimes also I think that the regime likes that [former

“With Maduro, what we saw was a return to systematic classic repression—arbitrary arrest, abuse on the streets, no due process, torture in detention.”

Venezuelan political prisoners and detainees] told their stories because that also makes the fear grow,” Franz von Bergen, a Venezuelan journalist, told Freedom House.²²

Pressure on families and loved ones

In addition to damage sustained by civil society when critics and opponents are jailed, the harms political imprisonment causes victims and their families are severe and long-lasting. Across all six country case studies, experts highlighted significant physical and psychological tolls. Abuses include systematic torture in Nicaragua and Venezuela, as well as violence during initial periods of arrest or detainment, and denial of medical care.²³

Moreover, the effects of political imprisonment extend beyond the individual who has been targeted, and the specific groups to which they belong. Families and loved ones shoulder a significant burden and may be pressured by authorities in efforts to persuade people to stop their activism or turn themselves in, or to further harm the initial target. Family members have themselves become targets for politicized detention and criminal charges, or have faced harassment, threats, and intimidation by state and nonstate actors, including government supporters and vigilantes.²⁴ In some cases, this can lead to strife within families.²⁵ Relatives have also fled the country as a result of the pressure, leading to family separation.²⁶ The psychological toll of political imprisonment for family members is massive and can arise from countless sources, including witnessing raids and arrests, uncertainty over their loved one’s whereabouts, and harrowing prison visits, when visits are allowed at all.²⁷

Economic hardship for prisoners and their families was also reported in each of the six countries under review: often it is the family breadwinner who is placed behind bars.²⁸ Bail and legal assistance can be expensive;²⁹ in addition, relatives



Urban planner and academic Tayfun Kahraman hugs his daughter goodbye in April 2022 as he begins an 18-year prison sentence in Turkey following the Gezi Park trial. (Image Credit: [@ibbhabercomtr](https://twitter.com/ibbhabercomtr))

often need to provide political prisoners and detainees with basic necessities, including food and medicine, costs that are particularly burdensome for lower-income families. In Nicaragua, a human rights lawyer, discussing low-income political prisoners in that country, said: “Their relatives struggled, and if they brought their prisoner food, they’d probably not eat that day themselves.”³⁰ The cost of traveling

to visit and deliver supplies to loved ones, and to attend court hearings, is similarly burdensome.³¹ Moreover, these impacts do not fade away upon release; they can be long-lasting. Programs designed to assist political prisoners will require holistic support that aids in physical, emotional, and financial recovery.

Emblematic cases

Aidan Eyakuze

Aidan Eyakuze is the executive director of Twaweza, a civil society organization that promotes transparency, inclusion, and openness in Tanzania. After one of their public opinion surveys from 2018 revealed a decline in approval for then president John Magufuli, Eyakuze was placed under a travel ban and his passport was confiscated. Authorities claimed the move was to facilitate an investigation into his citizenship. He immediately challenged the decision in court. After two and a half years, Tanzania’s Court of Appeal ordered the government to return Eyakuze’s passport, ruling that the government was unjustified in continuing to hold it.



Chaima Issa

Chaima Issa, a Tunisian writer, activist, and opposition figure, was detained in February 2023 on baseless charges of “conspiring against state security.” While a judge ordered her release in June, the public prosecutor appealed the decision, which had the result of prolonging her detention. She was ultimately released the following month with charges pending, but still faces significant restrictions, including a travel ban and prohibition on “appearing in public spaces,” amounting to a de facto house arrest. In December 2023, a military court handed down, in a separate case, a one-year suspended sentence for insulting the president.



Arnon Nampa

Arnon Nampa, an outspoken political activist and human rights lawyer, was sentenced to four years in prison in September 2023 for violating Thailand’s stringent *lèse-majesté*, or royal defamation, law, after publicly calling for reform of the monarchy during large prodemocracy protests in 2020. Over the past three years, he has been charged in at least 26 cases, 14 of them under *lèse-majesté*. Yet he continues to defend clients in no fewer than 20 ongoing cases, appearing before courts shackled and in a prison uniform on several occasions.



Photo credit: Prachatai/Flickr

Javier Tarazona

Javier Tarazona, a founder and director of the civil society organization Fundaredes, which documents human rights violations in Venezuela, was arrested in July 2021 along with two colleagues while they were at the attorney general's office. They had planned to file a harassment complaint against the country's Bolivarian National Intelligence Service (SEBIN) but instead were arrested and charged with incitement to hatred, treason, and terrorism. While his colleagues have since been released with charges pending, Tarazona remains in detention and faces medical conditions that have grown worse since his confinement.



Jesús Tefel

Activist Jesús Tefel was arrested in 2019, simply for bringing water to protesters. For offering such relief to the mothers of Nicaraguan political prisoners on hunger strike for their children's release, he was accused of planning terrorist acts and detained for 46 days. While in Nicaragua's infamous El Chipote prison, Tefel and others suffered psychological torture; among other actions, guards pointed guns to their heads and issued death threats. Amid a crackdown during the prelude to the 2021 election, he joined the tens of thousands of Nicaraguans who have fled the country.



Safiye Alagaş

Safiye Alagaş, a Kurdish journalist, was arrested by Turkish authorities in June 2022 following a police raid on her home and office. Detained on charges of making terrorist propaganda based on an article her news agency had published, Alagaş, along with 15 other journalists, was held in unsanitary conditions, deprived of certain books and newspapers, and reprimanded for singing and dancing. Like many journalists reporting on Kurdish issues in Turkey, Alagaş had been arrested and detained several times prior. She was conditionally released with a travel ban in June 2023 for the duration of her trial, which has already been delayed once.



Invisible bars: The impact of civil death

The civil death was terrible.³²

–Nicaraguan human rights defender

Physically confining government opponents and critics in detention and prison is a highly visible strategy for removing individuals from society. Beyond bars, however, is a litany of other tactics that erode the ability of human rights defenders, journalists, political activists and opposition figures, and countless others to live a normal life, let alone to pursue work aimed at advancing democracy and human rights. Several interviewees characterized this as “civil death.”³³ Civil death has also been recognized as a tactic by supporters of authoritarian leaders. For example, in 2016, a progovernment journalist in Turkey called for dissident academics to face “civil death.”³⁴

Civil death as a concept is not new and has been applied differently across a variety of contexts in literature and in other reports. These include conditions for government opponents and critics in authoritarian settings, analysis of contemporary and antiquated law that used the term, and discrimination against people with disabilities or certain diseases.³⁵ Our focus is on the former: its use to deprive opponents from participating in society through some combination of restrictive methods. Though not an exhaustive list, we have broadly categorized these methods as: controlling international and domestic travel, physically monitoring targets, limiting employment and educational opportunities and state services (blacklisting), and seizing property and other assets.

These measures can be attached to arrests, investigations, and conditions for release, or wielded on their own. They can be formally applied, with or without notice, or derive from social pressure. Closely connected to civil death is the constant reminder that prison is just one wrong move away.

The tactics that amount to civil death are most potent when used in combination. For example, close monitoring of an individual can have implications for their ability to travel locally and internationally. Monitoring can also be highly visible, with police officers swarming people’s homes and questioning their neighbors, resulting in significant

social pressure that can limit job prospects and lead to informal blacklisting. This blurring of tactics, and therefore of outcomes, underscores that civil death is not the result of singular, easily categorizable methods; rather, repressive tactics interact and blend with one another to create obstacles from all angles. In all six countries under study, we found that some combination of these tactics of civil death were applied to government opponents.

Because tactics of civil death are more subtle than outright imprisonment, repressive regimes can employ them to target large numbers of government opponents and critics with less scrutiny from international organizations, democratic governments, and other actors. These measures can also serve as an extended layer of control after a prison sentence or detention period has ended. Overall, the pressures amounting to civil death help to dissuade opposition and criticism, making it more difficult to enact democratic change over the long run.

Control over travel

Restrictions on international and domestic travel were widespread in the six countries examined for this study. Mechanisms to curb movement include travel bans, control over passports, requirements to report to courts or police stations, and other measures that significantly disrupt everyday life and participation in society.

Travel bans often accompany criminal investigations or are included as a condition for release. Ahead of the 2021 general elections in Nicaragua, Cristiana Chamorro, one of a number of presidential candidates who faced criminal investigation ahead of the polls, was placed under house arrest after announcing her candidacy and formally banned from leaving Nicaragua, among other measures.³⁶ In early 2023, in Tunisia, government critics Chaima Issa and Lazhar Akremi were detained on baseless charges of “conspiring against state security” and held for five months; conditions for their release include a ban from traveling and “appearing in public spaces,”³⁷ which was described by one activist as “a house arrest that doesn’t say its name.”³⁸ In Venezuela, after authorities violently suppressed mass antigovernment protests starting in 2014, many political detainees were also released under conditions that included bans on travel.³⁹

In some cases, travel bans are issued with no notification. Shortly after Saïed assumed exceptional powers in 2021, his government imposed travel bans on scores of Tunisians, many

HINDERING ACTIVISM THROUGH “CIVIL DEATH”

For every political prisoner behind bars, many more government opponents face significant impediments to participating in society through some combination of methods including control over travel and assets, physical monitoring, and blacklisting.

The infographic is a dark blue grid with four quadrants. Each quadrant features a red circular icon with a white symbol, a title in white bold text, and a description in white text.

- CONTROL OVER TRAVEL:** Icon shows a globe with a red prohibition sign. Description: "Arbitrary restriction of movement, including through travel bans, passport seizures, and required reporting to courts or police stations."
- PHYSICAL MONITORING:** Icon shows a pair of binoculars. Description: "Frequently carried out by security forces, who keep watch on homes, follow targets once outside, and question individuals and their neighbors."
- BLACKLISTING:** Icon shows a graduation cap with a red 'X' over it. Description: "Formal and informal barring of individuals from employment, education, and state benefits, or even stripping away targets' citizenship."
- CONTROL OVER ASSETS:** Icon shows a hand holding a house and a gear. Description: "Freezing or seizing bank accounts and confiscating physical property, businesses, and other assets."

of whom only found out upon arrival at the airport. This lack of notification or documentation leaves victims with little recourse or ability to appeal, including because it is often unclear which agency imposed the ban.⁴⁰

In other cases, separate restrictions amount to de facto travel bans. Many of the politicians, activists, academics, and journalists summoned to military camps for “attitude adjustment” after the 2014 coup in Thailand were released after signing agreements promising to obtain permission before traveling abroad, among other conditions. Failure to comply would result in renewed detention, a prison sentence, or a fine.⁴¹ Similar impediments to travel resurfaced amid the prodemocracy protests in 2020 and 2021; defendants granted bail had to secure court permission to leave the country, and it was often denied.⁴²

Surveillance can also function as a travel restriction. A representative from the Organization against Torture in

Tunisia explained that regular police visits to the homes of Tunisian opposition figures amounted in practice to restrictions on movement: “Even if they are not banned from traveling, they find themselves harassed by police agents or police officers who come to their houses, who ask them to inform the police station before leaving the [region].”⁴³ One year before Nicaragua’s 2021 election, police officers began to regularly monitor presumed presidential candidates Félix Maradiaga and Juan Sebastián Chamorro. Before they were ultimately charged and sentenced, security forces blocked both opposition figures from leaving their homes and informed them that they were forbidden to leave the capital city of Managua.⁴⁴

Arbitrary state control over passports and immigration processes also constrain travel. In Tanzania, baseless questions over citizenship have led to passport confiscations for civil society leaders and journalists. These investigations can take years to resolve, and severely impede targets’ ability to work and live.⁴⁵ Since 2017, Venezuelan immigration authorities have confiscated or canceled the passports of opposition figures, activists, journalists, and other opponents, while government authorities have refused to renew or issue such documents.⁴⁶ Since the 2018 crackdown in Nicaragua, officials have made it increasingly difficult for human

“[It is] a house arrest that doesn’t say its name.”

rights defenders, journalists, priests, government officials, and judicial personnel to enter or exit the country, and began to confiscate passports outright in 2022.⁴⁷ Similarly, following the 2016 attempted coup in Turkey, those facing open investigations have been deemed “unfit” to have a passport, even before any verdict is handed down in their cases.⁴⁸ This comes in addition to the mass revocation of more than 100,000 individuals’ passports soon after the attempted coup.⁴⁹

Required reporting to a court or police station at regular intervals is another means to control travel and monitor opponents and critics. Though political detainees linked to antigovernment demonstrations in Nicaragua were released as part of an amnesty agreement in 2019, many were still required to register periodically at police stations. More recently, Nicaraguan police acted in coordination to detain 57 people on May 3, 2023, journalists and human rights defenders among them. While they were quickly released, judges ordered them to report daily to the nearest police station,⁵⁰ with many losing their jobs as a result of having to adhere to this stringent requirement.⁵¹ Many political detainees released in Venezuela are required to report to a court at regular periods.⁵²

Controls on movement can have a deleterious effect not just on advocacy work, but also employment and education. A representative from Venezuela’s Center for Defenders and Justice, describing the situation for a human rights defender and journalist who had been detained, explained: “This victim usually has to travel to conferences and to carry out his work outside the country. One of the punishments they gave him was the travel ban. So, for more than one year, he cannot travel.”⁵³ For students, travel bans limit their ability to study at foreign universities. Requirements for regular reporting to a court or police station can also make it difficult to retain or find employment or to attend classes.⁵⁴

Restrictions on travel can also lead to family separation. A human rights defender explained that travel restrictions levied by the Nicaraguan regime not only prevented exiles from returning home—the measures also kept family members from visiting them abroad for fear they may be denied reentry to Nicaragua: “Neither one can return, nor one can leave, for fear that the same thing will happen to them.”⁵⁵ Civil death is not limited to the government’s primary target; anyone in their orbit can be ensnared.

Physical monitoring

Government opponents, real and perceived, have faced various forms of physical monitoring, especially by security forces. Officers may surround their homes, follow them once outside, and talk to their neighbors and employers. Nonstate actors, like government supporters or vigilantes, may engage in monitoring activity as well. Such actions are meant to intimidate political opposition figures, activists, human rights defenders, journalists, and others, hinder their work, and prevent them from living a normal life.

The Nicaraguan political detainees who were amnestied in 2019, and those who engaged in activism ahead of the 2021 election, faced significant such harassment by police officers and government supporters.⁵⁶ Jesús Tefel, an activist Freedom House interviewed, described the environment:

The main [activist] leaders always walked with patrols or motorized national police that followed them everywhere they went...It wasn’t to take care of you. It was to repress you, to watch you, and there was no way to run from them. As an example, once I was being followed by two motorcycles, they weren’t even dressed as national police. They were dressed as civilians. [Later,] in my office, there were several police cars and several vans, a lot of police officers. And they took away my license and fined me and told me it was for running...I spent about three, four months without being able to drive due to that issue. So it was quite difficult to sneak around. The houses of the leaders were always guarded, not even hidden, but in the public light...They asked for your identity card. They asked you where you were going, where you came from, who had seen you.⁵⁷

Many of the student activists involved in 2020–21 prodemocracy protests in Thailand faced relentless police monitoring, including those who had been arrested and released on bail. Kevin Hewison, a political scientist and expert on democracy in Thailand, noted that “it has been common for activists to have police standing outside their houses, showing up occasionally to check on them, to talk to the neighbors so that there’s social pressure brought upon them to cease their activities.”⁵⁸ Among those impacted are minors, who have faced constant monitoring that, according to Akarachai Chaimaneekarakate, the advocacy lead for Thai Lawyers for Human Rights, is “very normal, in fact, all [of these] defendants would tell me the same story: ‘...I see a guy in a white t-shirt with a certain haircut. Yeah, that’s definitely a plainclothes police officer.’ They learn to identify plainclothes



Tanzanian investigative journalist Erick Kabendera arrives at the Kisutu Resident Magistrate’s Court in Dar es Salaam in August 2019. (Image credit: REUTERS/Emmanuel Herman)

police officers.”⁵⁹ Electronic monitoring devices were also attached to Thai activists granted bail during this period.⁶⁰

Even without charges, opponents are summoned for regular interrogations meant to monitor and intimidate them. Political scientist Nate Grubman, discussing the imprisoned Tunisian opposition leader Rached Ghannouchi,⁶¹ said: “Before he was arrested, it seemed like every other week he was called into court on x charge, would spend the whole day answering questions and then they would send him home at the end of the day. He’s an old man. I imagine that that’s quite a burden. It would be a burden for anybody.”⁶²

The threat of surveillance and home and office raids has also forced individuals to change their behavior, including by adopting security enhancements. In Tanzania, Fulgence Massawe, the director of advocacy and reforms for the Legal and Human Rights Centre, shared, holding up his group’s office badges: “We used to work freely, but now we have all [these] accessible codes, magnetic cards, all this we started using recently.”⁶³ Home raids in Turkey have become so common for some government opponents that they prepare their houses for the event. Banu Tuna, a Turkish journalist and activist, explained that police officers often conduct raids on Friday mornings so targets would

spend the weekend in detention; she described one civil society actor who planned her chores around it.⁶⁴

Such visible monitoring creates social pressure, discourages free movement, and fosters a significant psychological burden. For example, Eric Goldstein, deputy director of the Middle East and North Africa Division at Human Rights Watch, noted that those dealing with frequent police visits in Tunisia face ostracization from their community, “not because the neighbors necessarily thought the person was justly imprisoned, but they just wanted to avoid any contact that could bring themselves under suspicion.”⁶⁵ A Tanzanian civil society actor, recounting his own experience, said: “They make sure that you’re not settled.”⁶⁶

Like other tactics leading to civil death, monitoring makes it difficult for activists, journalists, opposition figures, and others to advance democratic change and respect for human rights. Speaking about the environment in Venezuela under Maduro, one scholar said: “I think in the current moment... high-profile civil society activists or movement leaders... feel constantly watched, like they have to think through 10 times everything they do and make sure they don’t cross the government.”⁶⁷ A civil society actor, discussing social media

activity in Turkey, said: “half of you is like, oh, I’ll be fine. They’re not going to come after me. The other half of you [says], if they do come after me, my life is over.”⁶⁸

Blocking access to employment, education, and government benefits

Political opposition figures, human rights defenders, journalists, former regime insiders, and ordinary people are among those who encounter politicized restrictions on employment and education, cuts to social benefits, and even denial of citizenship. This sort of blacklisting occurs most prominently in the public sector, but societal pressure can also impact individuals’ ability to participate in the private sector.

Systematic blacklisting has occurred with the acceleration of democratic erosion. As former president Chávez reshaped Venezuelan society, “the terror...was you could be blacklisted and lose access to job[s] and government services,” said Javier Corrales, a political scientist.⁶⁹ Efforts to recall both Chávez and Maduro from the presidency prompted mass dismissals and blacklisting, for example. Following attempts to recall Chávez in 2004, progovernment politician Luis Tascón published online a list of individuals who had signed the relevant petitions, which had been assembled by the National Electoral Council at Chávez’s behest. Eponymously called the Tascón List, it guided firing and blacklisting decisions for government and state-owned company employers.⁷⁰ Similar purges occurred during an attempt to recall Maduro in 2016.⁷¹ In Nicaragua, public servants including health care workers, teachers, and professors faced dismissals for playing a role in the 2018 protests or aiding participants.⁷²

In Turkey, a group of over a thousand scholars known as the Academics for Peace signed an open letter in January 2016 expressing support for peace with the outlawed Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), and were subsequently dismissed from their jobs and barred from working in the public sector.⁷³ In response to their letter, a progovernment journalist called for “mechanisms of civil death” to be applied to them, and for society to exclude them.⁷⁴ A few months later, following the attempted coup, over 100,000 public sector employees were dismissed from their positions through various decrees, in the absence of due process,⁷⁵ on grounds of allegiance to the Fetullahist Terrorist Organization (FETÖ), the group held responsible by the government for the coup attempt. Like the Academics for Peace, they were barred from working in the public sector, their passports were revoked, and they were

unable to access health care benefits.⁷⁶ Being publicly labeled FETÖ supporters has also impacted their safety and freedom of movement, and could result in rearrest.⁷⁷

In Nicaragua, amnestied political detainees could not return to university, as their records were erased, and had difficulty finding work due to social stigma. One human rights defender recalled a case where an amnestied individual “was not even allowed to do little jobs in their community. She went out to iron or go out to wash clothes...and the people who hired her told her she couldn’t do that anymore because she was a coup plotter.”⁷⁸ Former political detainees connected to the recent prodemocracy protests in Thailand, with various charges pending, have also faced significant social pressure and problems finding employment and attending school.⁷⁹ Several interviewees in Turkey noted similar stigmatization of those targeted: “When you leave the jail, the mark and the trace leave with you,” said a Turkish academic.⁸⁰

“She went out to iron or go out to wash clothes...and the people who hired her told her she couldn’t do that anymore because she was a coup plotter.”

Discrimination in distribution of state benefits also contributes to civil death. In 2017, the Venezuelan government launched an identification card, known as the carnet de la patria, or homeland card, linked to a centralized online platform and necessary to access services provided by the state including pensions, medicine, and food.⁸¹ Hernandez-Roy noted that the card has been “used as a weapon...where they can track you,” and if someone is perceived as a dissenter “you won’t qualify for food subsidies.”⁸² In Tunisia, some of the magistrates, lawmakers, and others who were arbitrarily dismissed by Saïed have consequently been left without health insurance, which is especially harmful as many of them are older and have medical conditions.⁸³

Family members have also faced forms of civil death. In Nicaragua, the state’s moves to strip opponents and critics of their nationality had serious impacts on the victims’ relatives. The sons and daughters of targeted individuals have reportedly been denied medical care, entry to school, and

“When you leave the jail, the mark and the trace leave with you.”

passports.⁸⁴ In some cases, the government stripped children of the targeted parent’s surname in the civil registry.⁸⁵ In Tanzania, the children of opposition members face difficulty procuring state benefits, such as university loans. One scholar shared the story of a child unable to secure one: “They were like, oh, there’s no ink for the stamp. And he came back with ink and they’re like, this isn’t official government ink, I’m not going to use this.”⁸⁶ Emphasizing the opportunities for blacklisting, the scholar added: “There’s all these kind of choke points where you can essentially deny people access to what should be statutory benefits.”⁸⁷

While civil death can be gradual, as the consequences of repressive tactics accumulate over time, an extreme and sudden instance occurred in February 2023, when three judges stripped 317 Nicaraguans of their citizenship, including 222 political prisoners who had been released and sent to the United States. The decision was legally justified via legislative

reforms that allowed authorities to revoke the citizenship of those deemed by the state to be traitors. Among those affected were journalists, human rights defenders, civil society leaders, opposition leaders, and government officials.⁸⁸ The challenge of establishing themselves in a new country while processing the traumatic circumstances of their exile has been a struggle for many, and, “little by little,” said a human rights lawyer, “they lose interest in what happens in Nicaragua.”⁸⁹

Control over assets

Limiting government opponents and critics’ access to their assets, and thus to shelter and financial well-being, is another tactic contributing to civil death, and is often used in combination with the other tactics discussed. Like these, seizing or freezing bank accounts and confiscating property can be attached to criminal investigations, arrests, and conditions for release, or can stand on their own.

Political detainees deemed to have violated Venezuela’s Organic Law against Organized Crime and Financing of Terrorism can have their property confiscated under the law, including after they have left or fled the country: “You can see a lot of houses and offices around the country where the



Activists hold signs with the names of some of the political prisoners released from Nicaragua, as they await their arrival at Washington, DC’s Dulles International Airport in February 2023. (Image credit: Kevin Lamarque/Reuters)

police...the intelligence officers...use it personally, privately,” said a Venezuelan civil society leader, speaking of the seized properties.⁹⁰ Venezuelan authorities have also frozen opponents’ bank accounts and confiscated property and businesses more generally.⁹¹ Like other tactics, asset freezes may also be levied against family members.⁹²

A Tanzanian civil society actor ultimately lost his company after facing baseless criminal charges and other measures contributing to civil death:

I was not allowed to cross the borders of Dar es Salaam. My passport was taken. My personal bank accounts were frozen. I had a for-profit business. Now this is what they do...They make sure that you don't do business. I was no longer generating revenue because they managed to get into all people I was working with, my suppliers, whomever...they intimidated [them] and all of them stopped working with me. The company that I owned was taken by some guys from the ruling party without me signing any document. So I found myself not being a director in my own company. I found myself not being a shareholder in my own company.⁹³

In addition to stripping over 300 Nicaraguans of their nationality in February 2023, judges ordered their assets to be seized. The state confiscated houses and farms while erasing owners’ names from property registers, and banks froze the victims’ accounts. Relatives and tenants living in the seized properties were forced to pay rent to the attorney general’s office.⁹⁴ Asset confiscations have reportedly extended beyond those rendered stateless. A Nicaraguan journalist said: “There are people who have not been accused of treason but are opponents, but their homes have disappeared from the civil registry of property. That is, one day you are left with nothing. Your bank accounts are frozen, and the bank doesn’t even warn you.”⁹⁵

A frozen bank account presents especially significant problems for those facing economic insecurity. Speaking about conditions in Tunisia, Radwan Masmoudi, president of the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy,

shared: “People are suffering tremendously. The economy is really, really bad. There [are] a lot of food shortages. If on top of that, they freeze your bank accounts, how are you supposed to live?”⁹⁶

Lingering threats of civil death

Among the conditions that cause civil death, whether travel bans, police tails, erased academic records, or frozen pensions, is fear that the target can be sent to prison at any moment. A common refrain among those that Freedom House interviewed was that criminal charges are often never fully resolved, leaving open the possibility of rearrest. Obstacles to participating normally in society, along with the persistent threat of becoming a political prisoner, have caused government opponents to flee the country. The consequences of civil death can also serve as a warning to others.⁹⁷

Civil death inhibits democratic change because it can cause human rights defenders, journalists, opposition figures, and others to give up their life’s work. Akarachai, of Thai Lawyers for Human Rights, said: “Many of the protest leaders are burdened with a lot of these bail conditions and we feel that a lot of them are just really tired. These constant judicial harassments, bail conditions...really wear them down and a lot of them become a lot less politically active.”⁹⁸ Berna Akkızal, the executive director and cofounder of Turkey’s Civic Space Studies Association, expressed similar concerns: “People get used to those kinds of things, I guess. People get used to oppression. This is the hardest part for me as an activist.”⁹⁹

The more subtle tactics that lead to civil death, compared to outright political imprisonment, also make it more difficult for external stakeholders to recognize when civil death is happening and how it limits democracy and human rights work. Identifying the tactics that result in civil death, and understanding the overall impact it has on targets’ physical and mental health, economic well-being, and, at root, the ability to participate in society, is crucial to pushing back on and reversing democratic erosion.

Attacks on judicial independence and limited recourse

A key finding that emerges from the six country case studies, and that has consequences for embattled democracies around the world, is the central role of a compliant judiciary. In addition to serving as a key enabler of political imprisonment and civil death, declines in judicial independence drastically limit victims' opportunities for recourse and accountability. At the same time, in an autocratizing environment, members of the judiciary can themselves become political prisoners and victims of civil death, compounding declines in judicial independence.

Aspiring autocrats who won elections set out to overhaul the judiciary in multiple cases examined by Freedom House. Before he became the president of Nicaragua in 2007, Daniel Ortega, through an alliance with then president Arnoldo Alemán, was able to secure a number of favored appointees to an expanded Supreme Court; the courts had also retained judges who were allied with Ortega even before this pact.¹⁰⁰ By the time antigovernment protests erupted in 2018, a compliant judiciary was seated and served as a key facilitator of politicized detentions, prosecutions, and imprisonment.¹⁰¹

The situation is similar in Venezuela. After Chávez's ascent to the presidency in 1999, he effectively gained power to dismiss judges and reshape the judicial system via Chavista-dominated legislative bodies. They subsequently worked through an emergency commission to fire or suspend judges on dubious corruption allegations and later packed the Supreme Court. Because the Supreme Court controls lower-court appointments, the wider judicial system gradually became even less independent.¹⁰² Chávez's transformation of the Venezuelan judiciary made possible the mass repression that started under Maduro in 2014,¹⁰³ as well as the lack of legitimate avenues for recourse.

Similarly, Erdoğan has steadily weakened judicial independence in Turkey. The flaws of an already politicized judiciary were further compounded via a 2010 constitutional referendum that empowered Erdoğan to restructure it, allowing for sham trials against individuals and institutions perceived as opposing the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP).¹⁰⁴ A 2018 constitutional referendum granted Erdoğan even more power to appoint members of the judiciary.¹⁰⁵ Court decisions that favor defendants have also proven ineffective in practice, including a 2019 ruling that reversed earlier punishments and defended the free speech of the Academics for Peace: despite the favorable ruling, many group members experienced elements of civil death anyway. For example, some were unable to find work in academia because Erdoğan has appointed progovernment university rectors not inclined to rehire dissenting academics.¹⁰⁶

In Tunisia, soon after his suspension of the parliament in 2021, President Saïed dissolved the High Judicial Council and replaced it with a temporary body whose members were appointed by decree.¹⁰⁷ Saïed later issued a decree allowing himself to dismiss any judge without due process, and then fired 57 judges over alleged financial and moral corruption.¹⁰⁸ Though the Administrative Court of Tunis suspended 49 of the dismissals, the Justice Ministry has refused to reinstate the judges.¹⁰⁹ "Institutions practically no longer exist," said a former Tunisian political prisoner. "[We] have judges who are scared to decide on cases...When a society lacks justice, it's screwed."¹¹⁰

Military and special jurisdiction courts, which further limit due process rights, are also used against government opponents and critics. Politicized cases in Venezuela, for instance, may be tried in military courts or special jurisdiction courts for terrorism cases.¹¹¹ For a time after the 2014 military coup in Thailand, certain crimes, such as *lèse-majesté*, sedition, and violations of military junta orders and announcements, fell under military jurisdiction.¹¹²

Judges themselves are also at risk of becoming targets. Following the 2016 coup attempt in Turkey, the government purged over 4,000 judges and prosecutors,¹¹³ and over 2,000 were detained for suspected involvement in the conspiracy or membership in a terrorist organization.¹¹⁴ Two of the 57 magistrates dismissed in Tunisia were arrested and detained for months without trial.¹¹⁵ Pushback against attacks on judicial independence has also been punished: when a Tunisian judge helped to organize a strike in protest of the arbitrary dismissals, the Temporary High Judicial Council lifted his immunity as a judge and a criminal investigation was opened against him for "incitement."¹¹⁶

“When a society lacks justice, it’s screwed.”



Judges protest in Tunis in February 2022 after Tunisian president Kaïs Saïed dissolves the High Judicial Council. (Image credit: Chedly Ben Ibrahim/NurPhoto via Getty Images)

In Venezuela, Judge María Lourdes Afiuni was deprived of her liberty for years, in a case that served as a warning to other judges that they had little protection from severe and arbitrary state reprisals.¹¹⁷ In 2009, Afiuni had ordered the supervised release of a banker accused of financial crimes because he had been held without conviction for longer than the legal limit; the individual subsequently fled the country. Shortly after her decision, Afiuni was arrested on corruption charges, held in detention, and then, two years later, placed under house arrest before being released on the condition that she not leave Venezuela, among other measures. In 2019, she was sentenced to five years in prison.¹¹⁸ (The sentence has yet to be executed.)

In a major clash between high courts in Turkey, the country's top appeals court not only struck down the Constitutional Court's November 2023 decision that Can Atalay, a lawyer and elected member of parliament who has been detained since April 2022, should be released, but filed criminal complaints against the Constitutional Court members who voted to release him.¹¹⁹ Separately, in Venezuela and Tanzania, judges who fell afoul of authorities have been transferred arbitrarily, sometimes to far-flung jurisdictions.¹²⁰

Moreover, the rulings of regional justice bodies, which should serve as a last resort, are not always upheld. The Venezuelan Supreme Court ruled in 2011 that a binding Inter-American Court decision to reverse opposition figure Leopoldo López's ban on seeking office was unimplementable, as it conflicted with the country's constitution and violated its sovereignty.¹²¹ Turkey has ignored the European Court of Human Rights' order to release philanthropist and civic leader Osman Kavala and opposition politician Selahattin Demirtaş, while in 2019 the Tanzanian government withdrew its citizens' right to directly file cases with the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights; Tanzania had had the highest number of cases and judgments issued against it.¹²²

Lack of judicial independence on a systemic level leaves few avenues for recourse for government opponents and critics facing political imprisonment or civil death. While the resilience of a handful of independently minded judges may be a source of hope, they enjoy few protections themselves, and operate at their own risk.

Moving forward

Political imprisonment and tactics of civil death are crucial tools that authoritarian and undemocratic leaders use in an effort to remove their most strident critics from society. Moreover, employing the more subtle tactics of civil death against opponents allows them to evade the external scrutiny and outcry that political imprisonment often generates. In each of our six country case studies, we found that political imprisonment and tactics of civil death befell government opponents as they undertook a range of work to support democracy and fundamental rights. We further found that these attempts to banish them from society accompanied periods of stark democratic decline.

Despite the labyrinthine ordeal that human rights defenders, democracy activists, journalists, political oppositionists, protesters, and ordinary people undergo, or are in danger of undergoing in autocratizing settings, the work of brave individuals working to expose and counter authoritarian abuses offers reason for hope. Even at significant risk,

civil society organizations document rights violations and provide assistance to victims; defense lawyers advocate for clients who languish in jail, face farcical prosecutions, or are subjected to arbitrary travel bans; and families come forward to denounce their loved ones' unjust confinement and mistreatment, seek solutions and advocate for their release, and, along the way, create shared connections with those who face similarly horrid circumstances. In the courts, remaining impartial judges and prosecutors are still working to uphold due process and reject politicized persecution—but the risks they take in doing so underline the importance of preventing the degradation of judicial independence in the first place.

These diverse efforts serve to remind democracy's defenders that the struggle toward freedom, even in increasingly challenging environments, is not in vain. Working to secure the unconditional release of political prisoners is one step that international actors and democratic governments should take to complement local advocacy.

The challenges that political prisoners and their families face do not end after release, though. Also important is providing resources in the long term, including for psychosocial and medical treatment. Meanwhile, recognizing the less visible



High school students hold up the three-finger salute in front of the Ministry of Education in Bangkok, Thailand, in August 2020. The minister of education had recently stated that police could arrest students inside schools if they broke the law against protesting the government. (Image credit: ZUMA Press, Inc./Alamy Stock Photo)

tactics amounting to civil death, and shining a light upon them, can increase the cost of imposing such restrictions in the first place. These are only some of the actions that must be taken in order to counter authoritarianism and prevent future waves of repression.

“The work of brave individuals working to expose and counter authoritarian abuses offers reason for hope.”

Recommendations

Securing the release of political prisoners, ensuring their ability to participate in civic life, and addressing systemic conditions that enable the use of political imprisonment and repression

Political imprisonment and tactics to restrict liberty and civic participation (also known as tactics to impose “civil death”) are key tools for limiting dissent, and accompany wider democratic erosion. In order to counter authoritarianism, support advocates of democratic change, and prevent future waves of repression, democratic governments, public and private donors, and civil society organizations should monitor for political imprisonment and civil death tactics, and take action when they are present.

Securing the release of political prisoners

When calling for the release of political prisoners, emphasize that releases should be unconditional. All charges should be dropped and expunged from the prisoner’s record. There should be no bail conditions, travel restrictions, asset freezes, or other measures that restrict their ability to work and live.

Democratic governments should:

- **Tailor advocacy strategies to the unique needs and circumstances of each case.** The individual’s well-being is paramount, and the wishes of their family members and legal representation must also be carefully considered. Governments should weigh the pros and cons of advocacy to ascertain if state action could cause more harm than good in efforts to secure an individual’s release. With these caveats, utilizing a “carrot-and-stick” approach with perpetrator governments that includes both incentives and penalties has frequently been effective. Some political contexts, such as upcoming elections, potential amnesty days, and other opportunities can be maximized to push for prisoner releases.
- **Partner with trusted civil society actors to identify political prisoners and advocate for their release.** The sheer number of imprisoned individuals necessitates cooperation with trusted civil society actors. Governments and nongovernmental organizations should partner with groups working to identify and document cases of unjustly detained individuals, as well as groups that have the capacity to help advocate for prisoner releases. Trusted civil society partners may be based inside perpetrator countries, or externally but with close connections on the inside.
- **Coordinate agencies’ efforts among themselves and with democratic counterparts abroad.** Joint efforts to release prisoners are more effective than individual ones. Advocacy efforts should include coordinated efforts among government agencies and with likeminded foreign governments. Governments can strengthen such coordination by establishing a dedicated office or team within the foreign affairs ministry specifically dedicated to political prisoner and hostage affairs. Appointing dedicated staff to work on the issue will streamline existing efforts to free political prisoners and facilitate knowledge sharing and coordination with likeminded governments. Legislatures also have an important role to play in securing the release of political prisoners, including by issuing statements, introducing relevant resolutions and bills, and conditioning foreign assistance. Coordinated efforts between executive and legislative branches can have a powerful impact on political prisoner cases by presenting a clear and unified message from government. Likeminded governments and other actors should also synchronize messaging and make a common case when speaking up for political prisoners.

- **Meet regularly with family members of political prisoners, advocacy groups, media outlets, and journalists, in public and in private.** Effective efforts to secure the release of political prisoners take place both in public and in private. In private, governments should meet with families to show support, share updates on their loved one's case, and gather information relevant to advancing their release. Private meetings with advocacy groups and others are also important for information gathering and message coordination. Public appearances by government officials on behalf of the imprisoned individual, when appropriate and condoned by the prisoner or family, demonstrate support for the prisoner and signal to perpetrating governments that they should expect a sustained campaign to free them. Many political prisoners and their families fear they will be forgotten. Democratic governments and those working for the release of prisoners should, with family approval, keep a public spotlight on those unjustly detained to increase awareness and pressure perpetrator regimes for their release. Stakeholders can highlight individual cases by publicizing an individual's activism, the circumstances of their detention, or their treatment in prison. Executive and legislative officials and staff should share press releases, statements, and social media posts about individual cases. Murals, letter-writing campaigns, and music are also effective and creative ways to generate public awareness. Efforts to secure the release of political prisoners should go beyond the most high-profile imprisonments and include advocacy on behalf of lesser-known individuals, as giving political prisoners a higher profile through advocacy work can improve their treatment in prison and prompt governments to expedite cases.
- **Include political prisoner advocacy among the key duties of embassy personnel.** Embassy personnel working in countries with political prisoners should, pending approval from the imprisoned individual's legal advisers or family members, attend and monitor trials and hearings of individuals facing politically motivated charges and of those already in detention or prison. They should also conduct visits to detention facilities to assess political prisoners' health, inspect conditions, and determine needs.
- **Highlight the staggering rate of unjust imprisonment and deplorable prison conditions at international forums,** including by inviting formerly detained individuals and relatives of those unjustly detained, and placing political prisoner issues on official agendas. This also includes calling out when a perpetrator country's human rights body, ombudsman, or equivalent entity makes misleading statements about prison conditions or other relevant topics. Democratic governments should call for an end to prison abuses, including torture, and draw attention to cases where family and lawyer visits to prisoners are denied. There are many accounts of prisoners being denied access to professional medical care, including by using security as a pretext, and governments should call out these instances and pressure perpetrator governments to allow access.
- **Support initiatives to “adopt a political prisoner.”** Examples of existing initiatives that could be emulated include the Defending Freedoms Project run by the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission in the US House of Representatives, in partnership with the Senate Human Rights Caucus and civil society organizations including Freedom House; and the Belarusian “Prisoner Godparenthood” program by Libereco, an independent German-Swiss human rights organization. Both programs help legislators to choose the case of an individual political prisoner and advocate for their release in public and private settings, including through op-eds and floor speeches, and by writing to the prisoner or their family. Such programs are not exclusive to government participation—celebrities and influencers are also effective in amplifying campaigns to free political prisoners.
- **Work with civil society groups to create a safe platform to collect information on prisoner rights violations.** This information can be used to seek accountability for perpetrators during or after the period during which a political prisoner is incarcerated.

Democratic governments and donors should:

- **Provide financial resources to support political prisoners, their families, and their lawyers, including adequate support after release.** Donors should provide financial assistance to cover the legal expenses incurred by detained human rights defenders and their families, including attorney fees, defense expert fees, and costs related to legal disputes. Donors can also provide support by funding local civil society organizations that offer legal services and are often underresourced. Donors should also be prepared to provide funds to support appeals to higher courts following an unjust sentencing, as well as legal inquiries as to detention conditions and official complaints. In some cases, political prisoners are transferred deliberately to locations far from their communities; in such cases, donors should consider offering additional funding for travel and accommodation costs for lawyers to visit relocated clients.

Donors can support families of political prisoners by providing them with funds to send humanitarian packages to their imprisoned relatives, including basic staples that are not available in prison, as well as by covering transportation costs to visit detainees and attend court proceedings. Additional support for the spouses of political prisoners would also be beneficial, as many are forced to assume the role of primary breadwinner while their loved one is behind bars.

Former prisoners often face difficulty securing work, housing, and education due to both legal barriers and social stigmatization. They may also experience difficulty accessing services—including medical care and psychosocial support, which may be necessary as a result of extended time in harsh and overcrowded prison conditions—because of stigma and discrimination associated with imprisonment. Furthermore, they can face smear campaigns by state and nonstate actors, intimidation from landlords and potential employers, surveillance, and the threat of rearrest, as well as imprisonment of their family members in an effort to silence them post-release. Support programs should also include relocation aid depending on the wishes of the former political prisoner, or conditions the perpetrator government has placed upon their release.

- Support efforts to improve prison conditions and access to health care.** Increase support to develop strategic services and advocacy to improve conditions of imprisonment in line with human rights conventions and treaties. Conduct or fund policy research to document the health and human rights situations of prisoners and former prisoners, during and after release, and the services and policies that impact these health and rights related conditions. Build capacity for collaboration and sustained advocacy and litigation at national and international levels for prisoners’ health and rights. Connect former prisoners with first-hand knowledge of health care conditions in prison with those working on prison conditions in the perpetrating country, including human rights defenders, civil society organizations, and policymakers at national, regional, and international levels.

SUPPORT NEEDS FOR POLITICAL PRISONERS

The following needs accompany the long lifecycle of political imprisonment.

| | Pretrial | Detention | After release |
|--|--|---|--|
| Donors | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attorney fees Transportation for family and lawyers to visit detainees and attend court proceedings Funding to cover basic needs of defendant and their dependents | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attorney fees for preparation and submission of court appeals, legal inquiries, and complaints Transportation Funding for dependents Humanitarian packages to provide basic staples to detainees (food, clothing, other needs) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Psychosocial support Medical treatment Relocation Funding to cover basic needs if the former political prisoner is unable to find sufficient employment |
| Democratic governments and civil society | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Call public attention to the unlawful detention and arrest of human rights defenders and urge their immediate and unconditional release | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Letters of support Inquiries into prisoners’ wellbeing and treatment Public spotlight on the contributions of the imprisoned individual and their unjust detention | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assistance to support needs after release Condemnation of any post-release restrictions such as travel bans; frozen bank accounts |

Responding to political imprisonment and civil death

For every political prisoner behind bars, many more government opponents and critics face restrictions that severely impact their ability to work and to live a normal life, amounting to what experts have termed “civil death.” Tactics of civil death include control over travel, physical monitoring, blacklisting, and asset seizures, and often occur in combination.

Governments should recognize that tactics to limit liberty go beyond outright imprisonment and take action to support rights defenders, including by helping those at serious risk to relocate, to continue their work abroad, and to return home if it becomes safe to do so. Ensuring that human rights defenders who have experienced imprisonment or civil death can reintegrate into society is critical to strengthening democracy and the protection of fundamental rights.

- **Democratic governments should support the relocation of human rights defenders, activists, and journalists at serious risk of political imprisonment or civil death.** Relocation support may be needed for the short, medium, or long term, and includes individuals who may be subject to travel bans or have had their passports confiscated. Governments should provide visas for those needing short- or medium-term relocation, and embassies in perpetrator countries should work to resolve politicized restrictions on travel. For those who need to relocate in the long term, governments should ensure that immigration procedures for asylum seekers and refugees are clear, transparent, and swift. Governments should facilitate family reunification if a human rights defender’s family members are not able to initially accompany them. Democratic governments should work to identify and provide support to other democracies that are willing to accept and support exiled dissidents but may not have the resources to do so without additional support. However, democracies should avoid sending refugees and exiles to countries with nondemocratic governments, as this could place them at greater risk. Relocation efforts should take into account that even in democratic countries, individuals may still be at risk of [transnational repression](#)—when governments reach beyond their borders to silence critics and opponents.
- **Democratic governments and donors should fund periodic assessments of the risk at home for exiled human rights defenders,** ideally in collaboration with local contacts and civil society organizations in the home country. Assessments should include information on conditions for the human rights defender upon their return, factoring in problems like difficulty finding work and the potential for social stigmatization, and include recommendations for how governments and donors can support them. In cases where permanent relocation is necessary, democratic governments should support efforts that help exiled human rights defenders continue contributing to human rights work taking place in their home country.
 - **In the United States, policymakers should establish a limited visa category to provide precleared at-risk human rights defenders and democracy activists with a multiple-entry, multiyear nonimmigrant visa.** This would allow those facing unjust imprisonment or physical threats due to the nature of their work to continue their work from the safety of the United States, before they are able to safely return home. Vulnerable human rights defenders could be nominated by US embassy personnel in close consultation with civil society partners and likeminded democratic governments.
 - **In the European Union (EU)—as a coalition of 50 international civil society organizations led by ProtectDefenders.eu [has advocated for](#)—a special, accelerated visa process for human rights defenders guaranteeing predictability, consistency, and protection for those who are most at-risk should be developed.** This should be a multiple-entry, long-term visa, and application procedures for it should be user-friendly and available in multiple relevant languages. Additionally, financial requirements should be alleviated, visa application processing fees should be waived for at-risk human rights defenders, and the visa processing time should be shorter to allow for urgent procedures. Embassies of EU countries should receive and process visa applications, and a special office for human rights-defender visa processes should be created. Local and international civil society organizations identified as partners should be able to refer cases to the office and confirm individuals’ status as a rights defender, helping to speed up the visa processing. National human rights institutions and civil society groups should be consulted and involved in implementing this new EU visa application process.
- **Democratic governments and donors should help targets of political imprisonment and civil death protect their digital security.** No matter their location, at-risk human rights defenders and democracy advocates are at risk of repression

online, and benefit from the assistance of groups that offer strategic digital security training. Democratic governments and donors should support groups that help rights defenders encrypt emails; password protect servers; upgrade equipment; detect malware; lock phones; and protect themselves on social media.

- **Private-sector actors should consult with democratic governments and civil society to ensure that de-risking measures do not adversely impact human rights defenders.** Businesses routinely take steps to limit their exposure to legal, financial, and reputational risk, and to comply with sanctions and regulations related to financial crimes, corruption, and terrorist activity. These measures have sometimes negatively impacted human rights defenders: for example, rights advocates have had their bank accounts closed, seen traffic redirected from their websites, and have been denied access to crowdfunding platforms. When making decisions about how to manage risk exposure, financial institutions and corporations should meet with human rights defenders and civil society organizations so they are aware of how their business practices and de-risking efforts impact this work, and they should take steps to ensure that de-risking measures do not have unintended consequences for rights activists and civilians.
- **Regional institutions should continue to spotlight and condemn violations of human rights, including the use of political imprisonment or post-prison restrictions on liberty, because of their unique ability to influence the target country,** sometimes with more impact than from specific democratic governments outside the region.

Addressing systemic conditions that enable political imprisonment and civil death

Political imprisonment and civil death tactics occur in both hardened authoritarian contexts and in countries experiencing democratic erosion. The following recommendations are ways stakeholders can address systemic conditions that enable political imprisonment and civil death tactics, and work to reverse democratic backsliding.

- **Democratic governments and international rights organizations should support local civil society groups and citizen-led social movements.** Efforts should include assistance and training on issues like coalition and constituency building, advocacy, organizational development, and physical and digital security. Democratic governments and international groups can show solidarity with local groups and movements by meeting with their representatives when they travel abroad, and accommodating logistical challenges like translation and interpretation.
- **Organize multilateral efforts to address democratic backsliding.** Efforts to counter authoritarianism and empower rights defenders are most effective when they are coordinated. Democracies should devise comprehensive strategies for deploying targeted sanctions to ensure accountability for international human rights abuses and acts of corruption. When possible, democracies should coordinate their efforts and jointly impose sanctions on perpetrators for maximum impact, as the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the EU have done in recent cases. Democratic nations that do not yet have laws allowing for targeted sanctions for human rights abuses and acts of corruption should enact them, and those with laws on the books should ensure that they are fully resourced and enforced. Democratic governments should continue to press for respect for human rights no matter how repressive the system. Doing so can increase the costs of rights violations, including political imprisonment, and also prevent such acts from happening in the first place.
- **Democratic governments should use the potential elimination or restriction of nonhumanitarian aid to a country as a tool to combat repression, including political imprisonment and tactics of civil death.** Even when the amount of foreign assistance is relatively small, this tactic bolsters rights defenders inside the country by showing that external actors take notice of repression. Assistance should come with conditions tied to respect for human rights and democracy.
- **International financial institutions should push back against authoritarian laws or practices** that curb their ability to operate in-country. These institutions, like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, as well as regional banks like the Inter-American Development Bank, Asian Development Bank, and the African Development Bank, should also ensure that assistance to countries is conditioned on respect for democracy and human rights.
- **Democratic countries with legislation on terrorism, cybercrime, and disinformation should be proactive in distinguishing their laws from authoritarian regimes** that claim they are adopting similar legislation in their countries, where there is evidence that those laws have been used to target journalists, human rights defenders, and other activists.

- **International law on arbitrary detention, and international and regional justice mechanisms should be used to hold perpetrators accountable.** While the use of these mechanisms by UN bodies and other groups may not always have immediate impact on the release of a specific prisoner, they can have broader long-term impact by making government officials more reluctant to jail human rights defenders because they may not want to invite scrutiny.
- **Democratic governments should scrutinize autocratic governments' claims that human rights defenders have engaged in criminal activity.** Criminal charges against rights defenders lodged in countries rated Partly Free or Not Free by *Freedom in the World* should be afforded extra scrutiny. Allegations of drunk driving, money laundering, drug trafficking, and other crimes can be used to detain government opponents while reducing the likelihood of allegations that the targeted individual is a political prisoner. When democratic governments have the capacity to conduct their own assessment, or work with civil society groups that can provide independent analysis of potentially bogus charges, they should expose such charges as aiming to legitimize a crackdown on democratic activism.
- **Democratic governments should scrutinize conditions for prisoners' release.** When political prisoners are released, including through amnesty or pardons, they often continue to face illegitimate restrictions including daily reporting to the authorities or prohibition from traveling to certain locations or abroad. In such situations, governments should continue to pressure the regimes responsible for these post-release measures until all restrictions are lifted.
- **Democratic governments should expand the focus on political prisoners beyond the number of individuals wrongly detained.** Prisoner “censuses” are useful tools, but they are not comprehensive. For example, they may not reveal the “revolving door” phenomenon, in which individual prisoners are held for shorter periods of time but face rearrest, or some individuals are released while others are detained. Governments should engage with local civil society groups and diaspora groups to gain a more comprehensive picture of the scope and methods of political imprisonment in a country when crafting strategies to combat political imprisonment.
- Freedom House offers further [recommendations](#) for addressing democratic decline in our annual *Freedom in the World* report.

Pushing back against attacks on judicial independence

In many undemocratic contexts, declining judicial independence allows the regime to harness the courts as part of its oppressive infrastructure, facilitating politically motivated prosecutions, detentions, and sentencing. Democratic governments, civil society organizations, and donors should push back against attacks on the rule of law and governments' use of the judiciary to enact repression, as well as against the persecution of independent judges.

- **Seek to strengthen judicial independence in countries receiving foreign assistance** by encouraging judicial review and oversight, increased transparency of judicial decisions, and adherence to judicial codes of ethics. Similarly, donors should encourage implementation of procedural codes that reflect human rights standards and criminal justice reforms.
- **Publicly and privately denounce instances where judges are targeted** for refusing to uphold politically motivated charges against human rights or prodemocracy advocates.
- **Support judges' associations** in which members of the judiciary are encouraged to take an active role in discussing and advocating for judicial and legal reform, in consultation with civil society.
- **Apply targeted sanctions against prosecutors and judges** who are responsible for wrongly prosecuting, convicting, and sentencing human rights defenders, journalists, and other activists.

Endnotes

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