

THE WORLD'S MOST REPRESSIVE REGIMES 2002

A Special Report to the 58th Session of the United Nations
Commission on Human Rights, Geneva, 2002

Excerpted from:

Freedom in the World
The Annual Survey of Political Rights & Civil Liberties
2001--2002

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INTRODUCTION

This year, as is the case each year, Freedom House appears before the United Nations Commission on Human Rights at its session in Geneva to present its findings on the state of political rights and civil liberties and to highlight areas of great urgency and concern. In this year's report, Freedom House again places its focus on the most repressive regimes in the world.

The "Most Repressive" reports that follow are excerpted from the 2001--2002 Freedom House survey *Freedom in the World*. The ratings and accompanying essays are based on information received through the end of December 2001. The countries judged to be the worst violators of basic political rights and civil liberties are: Afghanistan, Burma, Cuba, Iraq, Libya, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, and Turkmenistan. They are joined by the territories of Chechnya and Tibet. These states and regions received the Freedom House survey's lowest rating: 7 for political rights and 7 for civil liberties. Within them, state control over daily life is pervasive and intrusive, independent organizations and political opposition are banned or suppressed, and fear of retribution is rooted in reality. In the case of Chechnya, the rating reflects the condition of a vicious conflict that has disrupted normal life and resulted in tens of thousands of victims within the civilian population. Because the report is based on events through December 2001, Afghanistan remains on the list. However, events in the first months of the new year suggest a modest improvement as a consequence of the fall of the Taliban, an end to hostilities, and the beginning of a process of national reconciliation based on the participation of broad segments of the country's civic, political, and military groupings.

The states on the list span a wide array of cultures, civilizations, regions, and levels of economic development. They include countries from the Americas, the Middle East, Central Asia, Africa, and East Asia. Many of the states in this report also share common characteristics. They violate basic human rights, suppress independent trade unions, censor or control the press, and restrict property rights. Some of these states deny the basic rights of women.

This year in Geneva, we direct our attention to the plight of the people of Chechnya, who are being subjected to an ever-mounting humanitarian catastrophe and a death toll that are the consequence of the brutal prosecution by Russia of a war against the territory's pro-independence insurgence. Amid ongoing reports of war atrocities committed against civilians, Russian authorities have shown little sign of interest in a peaceful solution to the conflict, a dialogue to which the leaders of the Chechen people are open. Regrettably, the Chechen people and their mainstream leaders are caught between elements of Russia's leadership that seek to crush the will of the Chechen people, and isolated groups of terrorist extremists who seek to hijack the cause of the Chechen people in the name of a violent jihad. While focusing attention on the ongoing rights abuses in Chechnya, Freedom House works to promote a dialogue between Russia and the Chechen people that can end the carnage.

Brutal human rights violations continue to take place in nearly every part of the world. Indeed, of the 192 countries in the world, only a minority, 86, are Free and can be said to respect a broad array of basic human rights and political freedoms; a further 57 are Partly Free, with some abridgments of basic rights and weak enforcement of the rule of law; and 49 countries (a quarter of the world total) are Not Free and suffer from systematic and pervasive human rights violations.

This report from Freedom House to the United Nations paints a picture of severe repression and unspeakable crimes against human dignity. But the grim reality depicted in this report stands in sharp contrast to the gradual expansion of human liberty that has been progressing for the last twenty-five years. Today, there are more Free countries than at any time in history. As significantly, there are 121 electoral democracies, representing 63 percent of the world's countries, up from 40 percent fifteen years ago. This progress is in no small measure the consequence of a growing global pro-democratic and pro-human rights movement. Increasingly, it is clear that countries that make the most measured and sustainable progress toward long-term economic development are those that are characterized by good governance and the absence of massive corruption and cronyism, conditions that are only possible in a climate of trans-

parency, civic control, and a vigorously independent media--all requisites of multiparty democracy.

It is the hope of Freedom House that by distributing information about the "Most Repressive" states and bringing these country reports to the attention of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, we will be aiding those inside these countries who are engaged in a struggle to win their human dignity and freedom. Through their courageous work, such activists are hastening the day when dictatorships will give way to genuine pluralism, democracy, and the rule of law—the bedrock not only of political rights and civil liberties, but also of true economic prosperity.

Additional information about Freedom House and its reports on the state of political rights and civil liberties around the world can be obtained on the Internet at www.freedomhouse.org.

Adrian Karatnycky
President, Freedom House
April 2002

Syria

Political Rights: 7

Civil Liberties: 7

Status: Not Free

Overview:

Glimmers of Syrian civil society activity emerged during 2001, as a result in large part to President Bashar al-Assad's earlier pledges to advance political reforms. However, by year's end, whatever progress had been made was effectively snuffed out as the government curtailed informal gatherings and jailed opposition leaders, critical journalists, and intellectuals. President Assad's room for maneuverability seemed curtailed by an influential old guard in the ruling Baath Party, a group accustomed to the repressive and corrupt status quo that had defined the rule of the president's late father, Hafez al-Assad. Many analysts predict Bashar will be forced to walk a tightrope in the foreseeable future as he balances modernizing his country with placating Baathist hardliners. Peace talks with Israel remained stalled during the year. Facing greater public discontent in Lebanon, Syria redeployed its forces there during the year, withdrawing completely from the capital, Beirut. Syria, included on the U.S. State Department list of countries supporting terrorism, appeared to cooperate with the United States in its war against global terrorism after Al Qaeda's attacks on New York and the Pentagon on September 11.

Following four centuries of rule under the Ottoman Empire, Syria came under French control after World War I and gained independence in 1941. A 1963 military coup brought the pan-Arab, Socialist Baath Party to power. As head of the Baath military wing, Hafez al-Assad took power in a 1970 coup and formally became president of the secular regime in 1971. Members of the Alawite Muslim minority, which constitutes 12 percent of the population, were installed in most key military and intelligence positions and continue to hold those positions today.

The 1973 constitution vests executive power in the president, who must be a Muslim and who is nominated by the Baath Party to be elected through popular referendum. The 250-member

People's Assembly holds little independent legislative power. The minimum age for president was lowered in June 2000 from 40 to 34, when Bashar al-Assad, at age 34, assumed the presidency after his father's death.

In the late 1970s, the fundamentalist Muslim Brotherhood, drawn from the Sunni majority, carried out antigovernment attacks in several northern and central towns. In 1982, the government sent the army into the northern town of Hama to crush a Muslim Brotherhood rebellion. As many as 20,000 militants and civilians died in the resulting bloodshed, which decisively ended active opposition to the regime to this day.

In June 2000, after Bashar became president, the 90-member central committee of the governing Baath Party was overhauled with the election of 62 new members, among them top army officials. This action seemed to indicate a concerted effort on the new president's part to ensure loyalty at the highest levels of government and to consolidate his rule, which led to new hope that the young, Western-educated, new president would push through political and economic reform. The president relaxed some restrictions, such as permitting informal gatherings of government critics.

In the beginning of 2001, President Assad raised hopes that he would expand his liberalization campaign. In February, he announced that private universities could be established, thus ending 50 years of socialist government control over higher education. He also publicly hinted at the prospect of allowing the formation of independent political parties. The trend toward greater freedom, would, however, be reversed by the middle of the year.

In August, a member of parliament, Mohammed Mamoun al-Humsi, staged a hunger strike to protest the government's refusal to implement meaningful political reforms. He called for an end to martial law, the creation of a parliamentary commission on human rights, and the implementation of anticorruption measures.

Syria made no progress with Israel regarding negotiations over the Golan Heights. Indeed, no talks took place in 2001. Israel has in the past agreed in principle to return all of the Golan to Syria in return for security guarantees. Prior to losing the Golan in 1967, Syria had used the territory to shell northern Israeli towns.

Tensions between Syria and Israel remained high during the year. In April, after the Lebanese-based and Syrian-backed

Hezbollah guerrilla group killed an Israeli soldier in an attack along the Israel-Lebanon border, Israeli fighter jets bombed a Syrian radar installation in Lebanon. Three Syrian soldiers were killed in the strike. Syria, which continues to maintain its 35,000-strong troop presence in Lebanon, often sanctions Hezbollah attacks against Israeli forces, ostensibly as a pressure tactic to force Israel to return the Golan Heights on Syrian terms.

During Pope John Paul II's visit to Syria in May, President Assad used the occasion to launch a stinging public attack against Israel, calling it a racist state. The rebuke was seen by many analysts as an attempt by the relatively untested president to shore up his stature in the Arab world, while leading to concerns in the West over his judgment and political acumen.

While Syria pledged its cooperation with the United States in the war against terrorism, some U.S. officials remain skeptical of Bashar's commitment. In addition to backing Hezbollah, Syria harbors radical Palestinian terror groups opposed to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

Syria faced growing calls within Lebanon for the withdrawal of Syrian troops from that country. Many felt more emboldened in criticizing the Syrian presence with the seemingly reform-minded Bashar in power; his father had dealt harshly with any dissent related to Syria's Lebanese occupation. In June, Syrian troops redeployed throughout the country and withdrew completely from Beirut. Viewing the move as largely symbolic, the Lebanese stepped up their vocal opposition to Syria's overbearing presence in their country.

Antiquated infrastructure and an overbearing and corrupt bureaucracy characterize Syria's economy. There are no industrial zones, nor is there a modern banking system. However, in 2001, the government authorized the creation of private banks for the first time.

Syrian unemployment registered 20 percent in 2001. With the population growing two times faster than the economy, Bashar al-Assad, upon assuming office, pledged to combat corruption and attract foreign investment. As first steps, he liberalized the rules against holding foreign currency and narrowed the powers of the economic security courts. However, by the end of 2000 and throughout 2001, the president's drive to modernize the economy seemed to taper off, leading to speculation that he faces significant challenges

from those grown accustomed to benefiting from a closed, statist economy.

Agriculture accounts for roughly 50 percent of exchange earnings and exports, and farmers make up 30 percent of the Syrian workforce, a segment of the economy hit hard by a 1999 drought. Oil accounts for approximately half of the country's exports, but many predict Syria will have to import oil within ten years as fields run dry.

Syria is known to be a major transit point of processed opiates, including heroin, from Central Asia. The country earns an estimated \$1 billion a year on drug smuggling to the Middle East, Europe, and North Africa.

Greater calls from parliament for economic accountability and transparency emerged during the year. In what was seen as an attempt to stimulate the economy, President Assad oversaw a cabinet reshuffle in December. Some long-time cabinet officials were let go.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Syrians cannot change their government democratically, though they ostensibly vote for the president and the People's Assembly. President Bashar al-Assad maintains absolute authority in the military-backed regime.

The Emergency Law, in effect almost continuously since 1963, allows authorities to carry out preventative arrests and to supersede due process safeguards in searches, detentions, and trials in the military-controlled state security courts, which handle political and security cases. Several non-governmental security services operate independently of each other and without judicial oversight. Authorities monitor personal communications and conduct surveillance of suspected security threats.

The judiciary is subservient to the government. Defendants in ordinary civil criminal cases have some due process rights, though there are no jury trials. In state security courts, confessions obtained through torture are generally admitted as evidence. Nevertheless, acquittals have been granted in political cases.

Hundreds of political prisoners remain behind bars. However, the government in November released more than 100 members of the banned Muslim Brotherhood and the Iraqi Baath Party.

Freedom of assembly is largely nonexistent. Technically, the interior ministry must grant citizens permission to hold meetings, and the government or Baath Party organizes most public demonstrations. However, once Bashar succeeded his father, citizens felt more emboldened to meet and criticize the government. Syrian intellectuals began meeting regularly to debate issues surrounding social, economic, and political reform. They issued calls for the creation of civil institutions such as an independent press, trade unions and associations, and political parties.

Sensing an emboldened civil society, the government in 2001 clamped down on the informal dialogue forums, attended by critics, intellectuals, and democracy proponents. In January, democratic activists announced they had gathered 1,000 signatures on a petition demanding greater political freedom and calling for the cancellation of emergency laws and an end to the one-party system. The following month, the government informed forum organizers that they needed permission to hold their meetings. The directive followed statements by President Assad to the London-based Arabic daily *Al-sharq Al-Awsat* that dialogue groups could only discuss the past and not debate possible future changes. He also ruled out criticism of the Baath Party, saying "the government will stand firmly against any work that might cause harm to the public interest." Soon after the president's comments, Baath Party member began speaking out against political pluralism on the grounds it would lead to the disintegration of the state.

In September, the government jailed Riad Turk, the secretary-general of the political office of the banned Communist Party and a government opponent. Two hundred intellectuals called for his immediate release and for those behind his arrest to be tried. Later in the month, Riad Seif, a member of parliament and an outspoken critic, was arrested for hosting an unlicensed political discussion forum.

Freedom of association is restricted. Private associations must register with the government, which usually grants registration to groups that are nonpolitical.

While the government authorized the creation of new independent newspapers during the year, freedom of expression in Syria suffered an overall setback in 2001. In January, *Sawt al-Sha'b*, the first newspaper not affiliated with the Baath Party, was launched.

In February, Ali Farzat, a well-known Syrian cartoonist, began publishing *Al-Domari*, an independent, satirical newspaper devoting ample space to mocking government corruption. In May, prominent human rights activist Nizar Nayyounf, was released from prison after nine years behind bars. The renaissance, however, was be short-lived.

In September, partly in response to increasing calls for political reform, the government passed a new, restrictive press law. The law allows for longer sentences for press offenses, legalized censorship, and the arrest of those calling for reform or constitutional changes. The law also grants the prime minister a veto if, in his judgment, a publication "undermines the general interest."

The atmosphere worsened with renewed official harassment of Nizar Nayyounf. In May, military intelligence agents reportedly detained him for 24 hours after abducting him outside his doctor's office. They allegedly tried to bribe him into remaining silent on Syrian human rights abuses and beat him when he refused to cooperate. In July, Nayyounf left for Paris for medical care, but not before announcing the formation of the Committee for Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation. The committee is to seek legal action against government officials and Islamist opposition members who have committed rights violations. By September, the government issued a warrant for Nayyounf's arrest on charges of trying to illegally modify the constitution and publishing "false" news reports abroad. With Nayyounf out of reach in France, the government began intimidating his family. In October, his brothers were dismissed from their teaching posts at government-run schools. In December, three other family members began a hunger strike in response to harassment, attacks on their property, and death threats, all suspected to have been carried out by government agents.

Internet access in Syria remains inchoate and highly restricted. Government ministries, some businesses, universities, and hospitals are connected to the Internet, although on government-controlled servers. While private access is not sanctioned, some private homes are believed to be connected to the Internet via Lebanese service providers. Bashar al-Assad is leading the drive to connect Syria to the Internet, but the country's ruling structure and intelligence services remain steadfastly against widespread access. Satellite dishes are illegal, although they are increasingly tolerated.

The state prohibits Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh-Day Adventists from worshipping as a community and from owning property. The security apparatus closely monitors the tiny Jewish community, and Jews are generally barred from government employment. They are also the only minority group required to have their religion noted in their passports and identity cards. Religious instruction is mandatory in schools, with government-approved teachers and curricula. Separate classes are provided for Christian and Muslim students.

Although the regime has supported Kurdish struggles abroad, the Kurdish minority in Syria faces cultural and linguistic restrictions, and suspected Kurdish activists are routinely dismissed from schools and jobs. Some 200,000 Kurdish Syrians are stateless and unable to obtain passports, identity cards, or birth certificates as a result of a policy some years ago under which Kurds were stripped of their Syrian nationality. The government never restored their nationality, though the policy ended after the 1960s. As a result, these Kurds are unable to own land, to gain government employment, or to vote.

Traditional norms place Syrian women at a disadvantage in marriage, divorce, and inheritance matters. Syrian law stipulates that an accused rapist can be acquitted if he marries his victim. Violence against women, including rape, is high in Syria. Women also face legal restrictions on passing citizenship on to children.

All unions must belong to the government-controlled General Federation of Trade Unions. By law, the government can nullify any private sector collective-bargaining agreement. Strikes are prohibited in the agricultural sector and rarely occur in other sectors owing to previous government crackdowns.

