

# THE WORLD'S MOST REPRESSIVE REGIMES 2003

A Special Report to the 59th Session of the  
United Nations Commission on Human Rights  
Geneva, 2003

Excerpted from  
*Freedom in the World 2003*  
*The Annual Survey of Political Rights & Civil Liberties*



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First published in 1999.

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# Introduction

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Freedom House appears before the United Nations Commission on Human Rights at its session in Geneva this year 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 reports that follow are excerpted from the Freedom House survey *Freedom in the World 2003*. The ratings and accompanying essays are based on information received through the end of December 2002. The 16 countries and three territories in this year's study rank at or near the bottom of the list of 192 countries and 18 major related and disputed territories that are surveyed annually by Freedom House.

Included in our list are nine countries that are judged to be the "worst of the worst" in terms of their civil liberties and political rights: Burma, Cuba, Iraq, Libya, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, and Turkmenistan. They are joined by two territories, Chechnya and Tibet, whose inhabitants suffer from intense repression. These states and regions received the Freedom House survey's lowest rating: 7 for political rights and 7 for civil liberties. Within these entities, state control over daily life is pervasive and intrusive, independent organizations and political opposition are banned or suppressed, and fear of retribution is a factor of daily life. 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.

There are, additionally, seven other countries near the bottom of Freedom House's list of the most repressive states: China, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Laos, Somalia, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam. These states differ from the "worst of the worst" because they offer some very limited scope for private discussion, while severely suppressing opposition political activity, impeding independent organizing, and censoring or punishing criticism of the state. The territory of Western Sahara is also included in this group.

## **Introduction**

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The states on this year's "most repressive regimes" 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.

Brutal human rights violations continued to take place in nearly every part of the world in 2002. Of the 192 countries in the world, 89 (nearly half) are Free and can be said to respect a broad array of basic human rights and political freedoms. A further 55 are Partly Free, with some abridgments of basic rights and weak enforcement of the rule of law, and 48 countries (a quarter of the world's 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 violations of human dignity. But the grim reality depicted in this report stands in sharp contrast to the gradual expansion of human liberty over the last twenty-five years. Today, there are more Free countries than at any time in history, and the number—which grew by four this year with the addition of Brazil, Lesotho, Senegal, and Serbia-Montenegro (formerly Yugoslavia)—is rapidly approaching a majority. As significantly, there are 121 electoral democracies, representing 63 percent of the world's countries, the highest number and proportion in the 30-year history of the survey and up from 41 percent in 1986. This progress is in no small measure the consequence of the influence of the global pro-democracy and human rights movements that have supported courageous activists on the ground.

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 transparency, civil control, and a vigorously independent media—all requisites of a multiparty democracy. In part, for this reason, the U.S. Administration has announced that it will examine which states "rule justly" and will use Freedom House's ratings for political rights and civil liberties in determining which developing countries are eligible for enhanced foreign assistance under the proposed Millennium Challenge Account.

The dramatic expansion of democratic governance over the last several decades has important implications for the United Nations and other international organizations. Today, states that respect basic freedoms and the rule of law have

greater potential than ever to positively influence the functioning of global and regional institutions. But they can only achieve that potential within international bodies by working cooperatively and cohesively on issues of democracy and human rights.

In 2002, Freedom House and the U.S.-based Council on Foreign Relations sponsored an Independent Task Force on the UN. It recommends the establishment of a democracy group at the UN to promote the values of human rights and democracy and to ensure that countries committed to respect for these fundamental principles occupy leadership positions within the UN system.

We hope that the 2003 Geneva meeting of the UN Commission on Human Rights can be an occasion for cooperation by democratic member states that can lead to the emergence of such a bloc. Democratic cooperation can best ensure that the attention of the UN Commission on Human Rights is properly focused on the countries with the world's worst human rights records, many of which, regrettably, have escaped criticism in recent years.

At the same time, Freedom House hopes that in distributing information about the "most repressive" states, we are bringing the violations of these states to the attention of the UN Commission on Human Rights. In this fashion, we are playing a modest role in aiding activists engaged in struggles for human dignity and freedom and 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 lasting 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 at [www.freedomhouse.org](http://www.freedomhouse.org).

Jennifer Windsor  
Executive Director, Freedom House  
March 2003

# Sudan

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|                   |          |
|-------------------|----------|
| Political Rights: | 7        |
| Civil Liberties:  | 7        |
| Status:           | Not Free |

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## Overview:

While there was some progress—including breakthrough agreements—on ending Sudan's long-running civil war, fighting continued in 2002 between the government and rebel groups in the country's south. An international commission confirmed the practice of slavery and religious persecution in Sudan. The United States passed the Sudan Peace Act, officially recognizing Sudan as guilty of genocide. The Sudanese government banned relief and aid organizations access to some war-affected areas of the country. While the government cooperated in the global war against terrorism, it also established camps to train militants for attacks against Israel.

The Sudanese civil war moved into its 20th year, but substantive peace talks and a limited ceasefire agreement provided some hope for a final resolution of the conflict. Peace initiatives have taken on greater urgency since the 1999 inauguration of a Sudanese oil pipeline, which now finances Khartoum's war efforts. The government has intensified fighting around oil-rich civilian areas in an apparent effort to drive out or exterminate their inhabitants.

Africa's largest country has been embroiled in civil wars for 36 of its 46 years as an independent state. It achieved independence in 1956 after nearly 80 years of British rule. The Anyanya movement, representing mainly Christian and animist black Africans in southern Sudan, battled Arab Muslim government forces from 1956 to 1972. The south gained extensive autonomy under a 1972 accord, and for the next decade, an uneasy peace prevailed. In 1983, General Jafar Numeiri, who had toppled an elected government in 1969,

restricted southern autonomy and imposed Sharia (Islamic law). Opposition led again to civil war, and Numeiri was overthrown in 1985. Civilian rule was restored in 1986 with an election that resulted in a government led by Sadiq al-Mahdi of the moderate Islamic Ummah Party, but war continued. Lieutenant General Omar al-Bashir ousted al-Mahdi in a 1989 coup, and the latter spent seven years in prison or under house arrest before fleeing to Eritrea. Until 1999, al-Bashir ruled through a military-civilian regime backed by senior Muslim clerics including Hassan al-Turabi, who wielded considerable power as the ruling National Congress (NC) party leader and speaker of the 400-member National Assembly.

Tensions between al-Bashir and al-Turabi climaxed in December 1999; on the eve of a parliamentary vote on a plan by al-Turabi to curb presidential powers, al-Bashir dissolved parliament and declared a state of emergency. He introduced a law allowing the formation of political parties, fired al-Turabi as NC head, replaced the cabinet with his own supporters, and held deeply flawed presidential and parliamentary elections in December 2000, which the NC won overwhelmingly. Al-Turabi formed his own party, the Popular National Congress (PNC), in June 2000, but was prohibited from participating in politics. In January 2001, the Ummah Party refused to join al-Bashir's new government despite the president's invitation, declaring that it refused to support totalitarianism.

Al-Turabi and some 20 of his supporters were arrested in February 2001 after he called for a national uprising against the government and signed a memorandum of understanding in Geneva with the southern-based, rebel Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA). Al-Turabi and four aides were charged with conspiracy to overthrow the government, and al-Turabi was placed under house arrest in May. In September 2002, he was moved to a high-security prison.

The ongoing civil war broadly pits government forces and government-backed, northern Arab Muslims against southern-based, black African animists and Christians. The government also sponsors the Popular Defense Force, a volunteer militant Islamic militia that fights against southern rebels. Some pro-democracy northerners, however, have allied themselves with the SPLA-led southern rebels to form the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), while northern rebels of the Sudan Allied Forces have staged attacks in northeastern Sudan. Some southern groups have signed peace pacts with the government, and there is fighting among rival southern militias. A convoluted

mix of historical, religious, ethnic, and cultural tensions makes peace elusive, while competition for economic resources fuels the conflict. Past ceasefire attempts have failed, with Khartoum insisting on an unconditional ceasefire, and the SPLA demanding the establishment of a secular constitution first.

The government regularly bombs civilian as well as military targets. International humanitarian relief efforts are hampered by ceasefire violations and are sometimes deliberately targeted by parties to the conflict. The government has denied access by humanitarian relief workers to rebel-held areas or where large concentrations of internal refugees have gathered.

A peace plan proposed in December 2001 by former U.S. senator John Danforth called for "one country, two systems" in Sudan, with an Islamic government in the north and a secular system in the south.

The international community stepped up its mediation efforts in the civil war in 2002, in part to prevent Sudan from becoming a breeding ground for terror, much as Afghanistan had become prior to September 11, 2001. Peace talks under the auspices of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) focused on southern self-determination, borders, and the application of Sharia in the south.

In January, U.S.-mediated peace talks between the government and rebels took place in Switzerland, leading to a breakthrough agreement affecting the Nuba mountain region, a 30,000-square-mile area in the heart of Sudan. The black Africans native to the Nuba region numbered more than one million in 1985, and have been reduced to some 300,000 today. The government frequently bombed the region and enforced blockades preventing food, fuel, clothing, and medicine from entering. The agreement allowed for humanitarian relief access, which was nonetheless blocked later in the year.

Fighting continued elsewhere throughout the year. While the government agreed to extend the Nuba agreement, and participated in further talks in Machakos, Kenya, rebels reported government-sponsored attacks in several towns and villages. In June, four civilians were reportedly killed during a bombing raid in the town of Malual-Kan as they left a Medecins Sans Frontieres compound to walk to church. The same month, the International Crisis Group (ICG) issued a major report that claimed Khartoum was intensifying its drive southward. The government's capture of oil fields has helped its war effort, enabling it to buy several Russian MiG fighter jets used to suppress rebels and bomb civilian areas.

## **Sudan**

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Amid reports of further assaults on villages and fleeing refugees, the government and the SPLA agreed in July on a framework for future talks. The agreement allowed for a referendum in six years for southern self-determination and the preservation of Islamic law in the north. However, a general ceasefire was not reached.

Following the capture by the SPLA of several southern towns, the government suspended the Kenya talks, prompting a further SPLA offensive and a renewed demand from Khartoum for an immediate ceasefire as a precondition for renewed talks. The government continued to bomb southern villages with MiG fighters and helicopter gunships.

In October, the United States passed the landmark Sudan Peace Act, which recognized Sudan as guilty of genocide. The act authorized direct aid to the south to prepare the population for peace and democratic governance. It also specified sanctions against Khartoum if Sudan is deemed to be hampering humanitarian efforts or not to be negotiating in good faith. In the same month, the Canadian oil company Talisman quit drilling operations in Sudan after enduring years of pressure from human rights organizations. It also sold off its 25 percent stake in Sudan's Greater Nile Petroleum Operating Company.

In November, government and SPLA representatives in Machakos signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on power sharing. The MOU also extended an earlier understanding on a general ceasefire and unrestricted aid access. Reflecting on the agreement, the ICG said both sides were "closer than they have ever been to ending the twenty-year civil war."

Al-Bashir has begun to lift Sudan out of its international isolation by sidelining al-Turabi, who was seen as the force behind Sudan's efforts to export Islamic extremism. Although new vice president Ali Osman Mohammed Taha, who replaced al-Turabi as Islamic ideologue, maintains a firm commitment to Sudan as an Islamic state and to the government's self-proclaimed jihad against non-Muslims, al-Bashir has managed to repair relations with several states, including Iran, Eritrea, Saudi Arabia, and even the United States. Following the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States, al-Bashir issued a statement rejecting violence and offered to cooperate on combating terrorism. In March, Sudanese security reportedly arrested a top operative of Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda terrorist organization. The Saudi-born bin Laden resided in Sudan for five years in the 1990s before being expelled by the government.

Prior cooperation with the United States in the global war on terrorism may have contributed to the American decision in September 2001 to abstain from a UN Security Council vote that cleared the way for the lifting of UN sanctions imposed on Sudan in 1996 for its alleged role in an assassination attempt against Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak. Despite its seeming cooperation, the Sudanese military announced in April that it had established training camps throughout the country to prepare volunteers for a jihad—holy war—against Israel. The United States maintains its own sanctions, citing human rights abuses and Sudan's apparent support for terrorism.

### **Political Rights and Civil Liberties:**

Sudanese cannot change their government democratically. December 2000 presidential and parliamentary elections cannot credibly be said to have reflected the will of the people. The major opposition parties, which are believed to have the support of most Sudanese, boycotted in protest of what they called an attempt by a totalitarian regime to impart the appearance of fairness. The EU declined an invitation to monitor the polls to avoid bestowing legitimacy on the outcome. Omar al-Bashir, running against former president Jafar Numeiri and three relative unknowns, won 86 percent of the vote. NC candidates stood uncontested for nearly a third of parliamentary seats, and more than 100 seats are reserved for presidential appointees. Voting did not take place in some 17 rebel-held constituencies, and government claims of 66 percent voter turnout in some states were denounced as fictitious.

Serious human rights abuses by nearly every faction involved in the civil war have been reported. Secret police operate "ghost houses"—detention and torture centers—in several cities. Government armed forces reportedly routinely raid villages, burn homes, kill men, and abduct women and children to be used as slaves in the north. Relief agencies have liberated thousands of slaves by purchasing them from captors in the north and returning them to the south. International aid workers have been abducted and killed.

In May, the International Eminent Persons Group, a fact-finding mission composed of humanitarian relief workers, human rights lawyers, academics, and former European and American diplomats, confirmed the existence of slavery in Sudan. After conducting extensive research in the country, the group reported a range of human rights abuses, including what under international law is considered slavery. The report also addressed abductions and forced servitude under the SPLA's authority.

## **Sudan**

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While the government has acknowledged forced servitude—especially of black animists and Christians—as a “problem,” it continued to use murahallen (tribal militias), to pillage Dinka villages and abduct women and children.

Although there has been no organized effort to compile casualty statistics in southern Sudan since 1994, the total number of people killed by war, famine, and disease is believed to exceed two million. More than four million people are internally displaced, and that number is growing as the government fights to clear black Africans from oil fields or potential oil drilling sites.

Distribution of food and medical relief is hampered by fighting and by the government’s deliberate blockage of aid shipments. In June, the UN World Food Program complained that a government ban on relief access to the oil-rich region of western Upper Nile in southern Sudan was threatening 350,000 civilians, many of whom had been displaced by fighting. The ban took place during the dry season, exacerbating civilian vulnerability.

Despite the ceasefire reached in the Nuba Mountains region, and a government pledge to allow unfettered humanitarian access to the area, aid agencies still encountered difficulty delivering food, particularly to SPLA-controlled areas. Prior to the ceasefire, the Sudanese military carried out a policy of “depopulating” the Nuba Mountains. In September, the government suspended all relief flights to areas of active fighting in the south.

The judiciary is not independent. The chief justice of the Supreme Court, who presides over the entire judiciary, is government-appointed. Regular courts provide some due process safeguards, but special security and military courts, used to punish political opponents of the government, do not. Criminal law is based on Sharia and provides for flogging, amputation, crucifixion, and execution. Ten southern, predominantly non-Muslim states are officially exempt from Sharia, although criminal law allows for its application in the future if the state assemblies choose to implement it. Arbitrary arrest, detention, and torture are widespread, and security forces act with impunity. Prison conditions do not meet international standards.

In May, the World Organization Against Torture reported that 12 prisoners charged with robbery were hanged in Darfour in western Sudan after being sentenced by a Special Court. While the court deals with criminal matters, it is composed of two military judges and one civilian judge. Lawyers were forbidden from appearing before the court. Other prisoners were reportedly awaiting execution.

Press freedom has improved since the government eased restrictions in 1997, but journalists practice self-censorship to avoid harassment, arrest, and closure of their publications. There are reportedly nine daily newspapers and a wide variety of Arabic- and English-language publications. All of these are subject to censorship. Penalties apply to journalists who allegedly harm the nation or economy or violate national security. A 1999 law imposes penalties for "professional errors."

In February, the editor of the English-language daily *Khartoum Monitor* was fined for publishing an article implicating the government in slavery. In July, security officials seized issues of the Arabic daily *Al-Horreya* (Freedom), preventing their publication. No explanation was given for the seizure. In September, authorities seized the issues of three papers and arrested one journalist for criticizing the government's withdrawal from peace talks in Kenya. The same month, a Sudanese Sharia court found U.S.-based, Sudanese author Kola Boof guilty of blasphemy. Boof was sentenced to death by beheading should she return to Sudan. Boof wrote a book critical of Sudan's treatment of black women.

Emergency law severely restricts freedom of assembly and association. In February, the College of Technological Science in Khartoum reportedly suspended several students for engaging in human rights activities, including organizing symposiums on women's rights and attending a conference on democracy. In November, the government closed the University of Khartoum indefinitely after students protested attacks on dormitories by pro-government student militias. Several students were injured and arrested. The clashes erupted following student celebrations of the 38<sup>th</sup> anniversary of protests against Sudan's first military government and against the banning of the University Students Union four years ago, when opposition groups were poised to win campus elections.

Islam is the state religion, and the constitution claims Sharia as the source of its legislation. At least 75 percent of Sudanese are Muslim, though most southern Sudanese adhere to traditional indigenous beliefs or Christianity. The overwhelming majority of those displaced or killed by war and famine in Sudan have been non-Muslims, and many starve because of a policy under which food is withheld pending conversion to Islam. Officials have described their campaign against non-Muslims as a holy war. Under the 1994 Societies Registration Act, religious groups must register in order to gather legally. Registration is reportedly difficult to obtain. The government denies permission

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to build churches and destroys Christian schools, centers, and churches. Roman Catholic priests face random detention and interrogation by police.

Women face discrimination in family matters such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance, which are governed by Sharia. Public order police frequently harass women and monitor their dress for adherence to government standards of modesty. Female genital mutilation occurs despite legal prohibition, and rape is reportedly routine in war zones. President al-Bashir announced in January 2001 that Sudan would not ratify the international Convention on Eradication of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women because it "contradicted Sudanese values and traditions." Children are used as soldiers by government and opposition forces in the civil war. The SPLA, which reportedly employs some 13,000 children, promised to demobilize at least 10,000 by the end of 2002.

There are no independent trade unions. The Sudan Workers Trade Unions Federation is the main labor organization, with about 800,000 members. Local union elections are rigged to ensure the election of government-approved candidates. A lack of labor legislation limits the freedom of workers to organize or bargain collectively.