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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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Introduction

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

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.

Jennifer Windsor
Executive Director, Freedom House
March 2003

Syria

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

Overview:

Political and civil liberties in Syria continued to deteriorate in 2002, under the weight of arrests and trials of leading reform advocates. Whether this reversal signifies President Bashar Assad's loss of authority vis-à-vis the regime's "old guard" or the consolidation of his power is the subject of intense debate by outside observers, but it is clear that sweeping reform of the repressive and corrupt political system built by his father is not on the horizon.

Located at the heart of the Fertile Crescent, the Syrian capital of Damascus is the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world and once controlled a vast empire extending from Europe to India. The modern state of Syria is a comparatively recent entity, established by the French after World War I and formally granted independence in 1946. The pan-Arab Baath Party, which seized control of Syria 40 years ago, has long sought to extend its writ beyond Syrian borders.

For all its pan-Arab pretensions, however, the Syrian government has been dominated by Alawites, adherents of an offshoot sect of Islam who constitute just 12 percent of the population, since a 1970 coup brought Gen. Hafez Assad to power. For the next 30 years, the Assad regime managed to maintain control of the majority Sunni Muslim population only by brutally suppressing all dissent. In 1982, government forces stormed the northern town of Hama to crush a rebellion by the Muslim Brotherhood and killed up to 20,000 insurgents and civilians in a matter of days.

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In 2000, Assad's son and successor, Bashar, inherited control of a country with one of the most stagnant economies and highest rates of population growth in the region, with skyrocketing unemployment estimated at more than 20 percent. In his inaugural speech, the young Syrian leader pledged to eliminate government corruption, revitalize the economy, and establish a "democracy specific to Syria, which takes its roots from its history, and respects its society." After his ascension, Assad permitted a loose network of public figures from all sectors of civil society to organize private gatherings to discuss the country's social, economic, and political problems. Under the guise of conducting an anticorruption campaign, the new president sidelined potential rivals within the regime.

In September, 99 liberal Syrian intellectuals released a statement calling on the government to end the state of emergency imposed by the Baath Party in 1963 and to respect public freedoms. Assad initially responded by releasing more than 600 political prisoners, closing the notorious Mazzeh prison, allowing scores of exiled dissidents to return home, reinstating dissidents who had been fired from state-run media outlets and universities, and instructing the state-run media to give voice to reformers. To the astonishment of outside observers, the government-run daily *Al-Thawra* even published an op-ed piece by a prominent economist, Aref Dalilah, stating that one-party rule is "no longer effective." By the end of 2000, a parliamentary opposition bloc had begun to emerge under the leadership of Riad Seif, a maverick member of parliament who repeatedly called for an end to "political and economic monopolies" and restrictions on civil liberties from the floor of Syria's rubber-stamp People's Assembly.

The "Damascus Spring" reached its zenith in January 2001 with the release of a declaration, signed by more than 1,000 intellectuals, calling for comprehensive political reforms, the formation of two independent political parties (without official approval), and the establishment of the country's first privately owned newspaper. The following month, however, the regime abruptly ended its toleration of independent discussion forums and launched an escalating campaign of threats, intimidation, and harassment against the reform movement. By the end of the year, 10 leading reformists who had refused to abide by newly imposed restrictions on public freedoms were behind bars. In 2002, all of the so-called Damascus Ten were sentenced to prison terms, while the security agencies arrested more than a dozen prominent journalists, human rights activists, and political dissidents during the year.

The regime's assault on political and civil liberties elicited little criticism from Western governments. In part, this was in return for Assad's cooperation in the war against al-Qaeda, his support for a key UN Security Council Resolution against Iraq in November, and the reduction in cross-border attacks into Israel by Syrian-backed guerrillas in south Lebanon during the latter half of 2002. It also reflected an assumption by Western observers that the crackdown stemmed from a weakening of Assad's position vis-à-vis the Old Guard and that outside pressure would benefit hard-liners. However, the crackdown has coincided with major administrative changes in the government and security forces that consolidate Assad's authority. Some dissidents suggest that the president exploited the Damascus Spring to outmaneuver his rivals and then ended it once he had gained full control of the regime.

Economic reform has also fallen by the wayside; dozens of economic reform laws remain unimplemented or have been put into effect half-heartedly, and hopes for a massive influx of foreign investment have faded. The bursting of the Zaytun dam north of Hama in June, which flooded some 1,200 hectares of arable land and killed 20 people, highlighted both the decay of the once-impressive infrastructure and the scope of bureaucratic mismanagement in Syria. The prospect of peace with Israel, which would free up funds for public sector investment and an expansion of social services, remains as distant as ever.

While regional tensions have bought the regime some forbearance domestically, there have been signs of disaffection boiling beneath the surface. In December, 150 Kurdish activists assembled outside the Syrian parliament and staged the country's largest antigovernment protest since the early 1980s. The organizers of the rally were promptly arrested.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

The regime of Bashar Assad wields absolute authority in Syria. Under the 1973 constitution, the president is nominated by the ruling Baath Party and approved by a popular referendum. In practice, these referendums are orchestrated by the regime (neither the late Hafez Assad nor his son Bashar ever won by less than a 99 percent margin), as are elections to the 250-member People's Assembly, which holds little independent legislative power. Independent political parties are illegal.

The Emergency Law overrides provisions of the Penal Code that prohibit arbitrary arrest and detention, giving the security agencies virtually unlimited

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authority to arrest suspects and hold them incommunicado for prolonged periods without charge. Many of the several hundred remaining political prisoners in Syria have never been tried for any offense. The security agencies, which operate independently of the judiciary, routinely extract confessions by torturing suspects and detaining members of their families. Government surveillance of dissidents is widespread.

At least four dissidents who returned from exile in 2002 were arrested shortly after their arrival. Although two were later released, one is still held incommunicado and another, Mohammed Hasan Nassar, died in custody.

While regular criminal and civil courts operate with some independence and generally safeguard defendants' rights, most politically sensitive cases are tried under two exceptional courts established under emergency law: the Supreme State Security Court (SSSC) and the Economic Security Court (ESC). Both courts deny or limit the defendant's right to appeal, limit access to legal counsel, try most cases behind closed doors, and admit as evidence confessions obtained through torture. According to the U.S. State Department, the SSSC has never ordered a medical examination of a defendant who claimed to have been tortured.

In 2002, two members of parliament, Riad Seif and Maamoun al-Homsi, were sentenced by a criminal court to 5 years in prison, and eight other leading dissidents were sentenced by the SSSC to prison terms ranging from 2 to 10 years (one was later pardoned). Several former government officials, including a former transport minister, were convicted on corruption charges and sentenced by the ESC to prison terms.

Freedom of expression is heavily restricted. The government is allowed considerable discretion in punishing those who express dissent, by vaguely worded articles of the Penal Code and Emergency Law, such as those prohibiting the publication of information that opposes "the goals of the revolution," incites sectarianism, or "prevents authorities from executing their responsibilities." The broadcast media are entirely state-owned. While there are some privately owned newspapers and magazines, a new press law enacted in September 2001 permits the government to arbitrarily deny or revoke publishing licenses for reasons "related to the public interest," and compels privately owned print media outlets to submit all material to government censors on the day of publication. Syrians are permitted to access the Internet only through state-run servers, which block access to a wide range of Web sites. Satellite dishes are illegal, but generally tolerated.

The journalist Aziza Sbayni and her sister, Shirine, were arrested in May 2002 and continue to be held incommunicado awaiting trial before the SSSC on espionage charges. In October, the authorities arrested two journalists who had written articles critical of the government in Lebanese newspapers, Yahia al-Aous and Hayssam Kutaish, along with the latter's brother, Muhammad, and charged them with spying for Israel. In December, police arrested the Damascus bureau chief of the London-based Arabic daily *Al-Hayat*, Ibrahim Humaydi, on charges of "publishing false information." In November, Assad fired the top two officials in charge of state-run broadcast media after they had neglected to edit out portions of a program in which U.S. Ambassador Theodore Kattouf said that Syrian support for terrorist groups hindered its relations with the United States. At least three foreign-media correspondents were expelled during the year.

Freedom of assembly is largely nonexistent. While citizens can ostensibly hold demonstrations with prior permission from the Interior Ministry, in practice only the government, the Baath Party, or groups linked to them organize demonstrations. Freedom of association is restricted. All nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) must register with the government, which generally denies registration to reformist groups. In September 2002, the regime indicted four members of the Syrian Human Rights Association (Association des droits de l'homme en Syrie, or ADHS) for illegally establishing a human rights organization, for distributing an illegal publication (the ADHS magazine, *Tayyara*), and on other charges.

All unions must belong to the General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU). Although ostensibly independent, the GFTU is headed by a member of the ruling Baath Party and is used by the government to control all aspects of union activity in Syria. Although strikes are legal (except in the agricultural sector), they rarely occur.

There is no state religion in Syria, though the constitution requires that the president be a Muslim, and freedom of worship is generally respected. The Alawite minority dominates the officer corps of the military and security forces. Since the eruption of an Islamist rebellion in the late 1970s, the government has tightly monitored mosques and controlled the appointment of Muslim clergy.

The Kurdish minority in Syria faces cultural and linguistic restrictions, and suspected Kurdish activists are routinely dismissed from schools and jobs. Some 200,000 Syrian Kurds are stateless and unable to obtain passports.

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identity cards, or birth certificates, which in turn prevents them from owning land, obtaining government employment, and voting. The September 2001 press law requires that owners and chief editors of publications be Arabs. Suspected members of the banned Syrian Kurdish Democratic Unity Party (SKDUP) continued to be arrested and jailed in 2002. In March, a suspected member of the party, Hussein Daoud, was sentenced by the SSSC to two years in prison for "involvement in an attempt to sever part of the Syrian territory." At least two Kurds arrested during police raids in April and May remain in detention. In December, SKDUP leaders Hassan Saleh and Marwan Uthman were arrested after organizing a demonstration in front of parliament.

The government has promoted gender equality by appointing women to senior positions in all branches of government and providing equal access to education, but many discriminatory laws remain in force. A husband may request that the Interior Ministry block his wife from traveling abroad, and women are generally barred from leaving the country with their children unless they can prove that the father has granted permission. Syrian law stipulates that an accused rapist can be acquitted if he marries his victim, and it provides for reduced sentences in cases of "honor" crimes committed by men against female relatives for alleged sexual misconduct. Personal status law for Muslim women is governed by Sharia (Islamic law) and is discriminatory in marriage, divorce, and inheritance matters. Violence against women is widespread, particularly in rural areas.