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Assessing the Damage from Changes to the US State Department's Human Rights Reports

The elimination of key sections and the diminishment of others will deal a heavy blow to US leadership on human rights, serve the interests of authoritarian powers, and leave policymakers and private-sector consumers with fewer resources to inform their work.

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What are the State Department's Human Rights Reports?

The annual Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, also known simply as the Human Rights Reports, were created by legislation passed in the 1970s. Since the first reports were published in 1977, they have anchored the United States' efforts

—imperfect yet enduring—to integrate human rights into its foreign policy. By methodically assessing countries around the world according to the standards set forth in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international agreements, and by improving gradually to capture emerging threats and incorporate more civil society perspectives, the reports came to be one of the world’s most widely trusted resources on human rights issues.

The Human Rights Reports are used in a variety of ways by a range of different consumers. They have shaped foreign and security assistance decisions by Congress, informed immigration cases and asylum adjudications, guided US diplomacy, and set global standards for the protection of human rights. They are said to be the most downloaded items on the State Department website.

What is different about the 2025 reports?

The latest reports, covering the 2024 calendar year, risk dramatically curtailing the credibility and legacy of this highly regarded endeavor. Critical sections are omitted, including but not limited to those on freedom of peaceful assembly and association, election abuses and irregularities, corruption in government, and protections for minority and other vulnerable groups. This year’s reports also exclude sections related to prison conditions, the right to a fair trial, and retribution against human rights defenders—all at a time when the State Department estimates that there are more than one million political prisoners worldwide.

The country reports themselves are effectively cut by more than half in length, offering only isolated examples of human rights violations in each section, rather than the traditionally robust documentation of the year’s developments. This obscures trends and patterns of repeated abuses, making it easier for authoritarian regimes to evade accountability by claiming that the few cited violations are rare in practice or taken out of context.

The topical sections that remain have other problems. While reporting on transnational repression, for instance, is statutorily required by Congress and has therefore been nominally retained, some reports include unrelated information in this section, many lack specificity, and others omit notable incidents or

phenomena from the year, such as physical attacks on Nicaraguan and Venezuelan exiles living in Costa Rica and Chile

Similarly, while the reports still cover freedom of expression online, the deletion of the sections on freedoms of peaceful assembly and association mean the loss of important information on other dimensions of internet freedom and human rights: Political dissidents, protest leaders, and civic activists often use digital tools to collaborate and organize, and repressive regimes consequently restrict and punish their online engagement. These dynamics and their implications may now be less visible.

Negative consequences of diminished reporting

Many of the rights and freedoms that have been dropped from the new reports are explicitly recognized in the US constitution and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which the United States has ratified. Reducing the scope of these reports will damage the United States' global credibility and leadership on human rights, weaken a proven instrument for advancing freedom and democracy, and deprive policymakers, business leaders, advocates, historians, and the global public of essential context.

If the United States stops holding all countries to an established international standard through consistent, comprehensive documentation, it undermines the legitimacy of the international human rights framework and suggests that rights can be customized and deployed by each global power according to its own specific interests. It would become more difficult to argue that universal human rights are actually universal.

Suggesting that some rights are less important than others would certainly play into the hands of the United States' authoritarian adversaries. The regime in Beijing, for example, routinely works to erode the legal and normative framework that protects fundamental freedoms around the world, particularly at the United Nations and other multilateral organizations, by promoting the primacy of economic development and social stability over civil liberties and political rights—most importantly the right to choose one's own leaders through competitive elections.

Indeed, the State Department's decision to eliminate coverage of electoral violations comes at an incredibly inopportune time. Voters in more than 60 countries went to the polls last year in what was hailed as a "global year of elections." In 2025, there will be more than 100 elections in countries and territories around the world.

The many institutional consumers of the State Department's reports will also suffer from their diminishment. US and international businesses have often used information contained in the reports to develop their risk assessments and related strategic decisions. Similarly, US and international government officials regularly relied on them to help inform policy decisions. In the last Congress, for example, senators and representatives cited the State Department reports in legislation 76 times. Secretary of State Marco Rubio repeatedly cited the Human Rights Reports during his time in the Senate, calling them a "crucial instrument in exposing human rights violations around the world."

Such consumers will still be able to turn to an array of civil society analysis and documentation, but few nongovernmental organizations can match the steady congressional funding, the embassy resources, and the overall staffing that stood behind the State Department's product. One of the reports' great benefits was their compilation of evidence from a variety of civil society sources. Consumers will now have to do this work on their own, and there may be fewer sources available to them: Many of the organizations cited in the Human Rights Reports covering 2024 have dramatically scaled back their operations due to disruptions in their federal funding this year.

Remedies and resilience

We strongly urge Congress and the State Department to restore their tradition of robust and comprehensive human rights reports without delay. Consistent US leadership in this domain is simply irreplaceable. At the same time, the recent changes have underscored the urgent need for other democratic governments and private donors to step forward and reinforce the broader global infrastructure of human rights reporting, reducing its reliance on any single product or funder.

Continued access to accurate reporting will remain critical for years to come, not just for government officials, businesses, and academic researchers, but also for activists and dissidents seeking to exercise their fundamental rights and hold their governments accountable for violations when necessary.

Organizations like Freedom House will strive to maintain their own well-established records of human rights reporting. But when one is confronted with the threats, lies, propaganda, and censorship of brutal regimes like those in China, Russia, and Iran, there is no substitute for the power and authority of a major democracy that is willing to studiously document the facts on the ground and hold them up against widely recognized international standards. The United States, through its State Department reports, has long played this role. Washington should not abandon it now.

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