

Introduction to the 2012 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices

This report assesses human rights conditions around the globe in 2012. Two years after protests in Tunisia and Egypt sparked the beginning of the Arab Awakening, countries in that region and elsewhere remain in the throes of unsettling and unpredictable change. The internal political and social dynamics of each country are different, but the quest for dignity, greater economic opportunity, and a stake in their country's political future remain powerful driving forces for men and women across the region.

Throughout last year, we saw encouraging examples of democratic change driven by the idealism and courage of leaders and citizens. Tunisia's President and Libya's Minister of Justice were veteran human rights advocates. Georgia held parliamentary elections that resulted in a peaceful transfer of power, a rare achievement among post-Soviet republics. And 2012 saw dramatic progress as Burma's government began to turn the page on decades of authoritarian rule.

The hope of the early days of the Arab Awakening has run up against the harsh realities of incomplete and contested transitions: Bashar Al-Asad's brutality against his own people in Syria; inter-communal tensions and political violence in Yemen, Bahrain, and Iraq; and serious hurdles to sustainable democracy in Egypt and Libya. The world faces new challenges as popular demands for democratic change surge against outmoded economic and political structures in many of these countries.

The publication of this annual report, now in its 36th year, reflects America's interest in, and support for, the advancement of human rights around the world. Our own strength and prosperity are more secure in a peaceful world where governments protect the rights and freedoms that are the birthright of all individuals. As President Obama said in his second inaugural address, "our individual freedom is inextricably bound to the freedom of every soul on Earth."

As we look back on human rights in the world in 2012, five developments are most striking:

- Shrinking space for civil society activism around the world;
- the ongoing struggle by people in the Middle East for democratic change;
- steps toward emerging democracy and a tentative opening for civil society in Burma;
- the game-changing nature of information and communication technologies, in the face of increased suppression of traditional media and freedom of expression; and
- the continued marginalization of and violence against members of vulnerable groups.

Shrinking space for civil society activism

Civil society is the lifeblood of democratic societies. Countries succeed or fail based on the choices of their people and leaders – whether they sit in a government ministry, a corporate boardroom, an independent union, or a cramped NGO office. When individuals have the ability to come together, air their views, and put forward their own proposals, they challenge and support their governments in reaching higher standards of progress and prosperity. Countries are stronger when the different elements of society work together for the common good and when a lively and critical debate informs government decision-making. Governments that welcome and foster civil society activism are more stable and resilient, and those societies are thriving; government crackdowns on civil society point to weakness and fragility on the part of those in power and are characteristic of societies where governments are stifling economic and social development. Unfortunately, some governments appear to be learning restrictive tactics from others and, in some cases, regional powers are setting a negative but persuasive example for neighboring governments.

Increased headwinds buffeted civil society in 2012, as governments continued to repress or attack the means by which individuals can organize, assemble, or demand better performance from their rulers. From Iran to Venezuela, crackdowns on civil society included new laws impeding or preventing freedoms of expression, assembly, association and religion; heightened restrictions on organizations receiving funding from abroad; and the killing, harassment, and arrest of political, human rights, and labor activists.

Russia adopted a series of measures that curtailed the activities of NGOs and civil liberties. These measures included laws restricting NGOs – particularly those receiving international funding – and large increases in fines for unauthorized protests, a law recriminalizing libel, a law that limits Internet freedom by allowing authorities to block certain Web sites without a court order, and amendments to the criminal code that dramatically expand the definition of treason.

The Egyptian government took action against domestic and international NGOs at the end of 2011, with police raids against a number of prodemocracy and human rights groups, including the Washington-based National Democratic Institute and International Republican Institute. The government charged citizens and foreign personnel with “running unlicensed organizations” and “receiving foreign funds without permission” and for several months imposed a travel ban on the expatriate NGO workers. Forty-three individuals remained on trial throughout 2012, in a process marked by delays, and the government continued to use an onerous registration process to prevent domestic and foreign NGOs from working in the country.

In Bangladesh, independent labor unions continued to face major obstacles to their ability to register and conduct organizational activities. Furthermore, a lack of government attention to safe workplace standards contributed in part to numerous deadly fires in garment factories, including the tragic Tazreen fire in December that killed 114 workers.

In China, the government imposed burdensome registration requirements that effectively prevented the formation of independent political, human rights, religious, spiritual, labor, and other organizations that the government believed might challenge its authority. The government increased efforts to silence political activists and public interest lawyers and employed extralegal measures including enforced disappearance, “soft detention,” and strict house arrest, to prevent the public voicing of independent opinions.

There are some hopeful signs, however. In Afghanistan, the revised Law on Social Organizations passed the lower house of parliament in December. Among other changes, the new law would remove existing barriers to the receipt of foreign funding for social organizations. In Mongolia, the draft law on Public Benefit Activities provides for a governmental foundation to support civil society. The government is also developing legislation on contracting out services to civil society organizations. If adopted, these laws will provide for new domestic funding sources for civil society and at the same time, ensure transparency and accountability in distributing public funding.

Ongoing struggle for democratic change in the Middle East and North Africa

The Middle East is in the midst of transformations every bit as profound and consequential as the changes which swept over Latin America, Europe, and Eurasia two decades ago. Progress across the region is uneven, and the challenges of this moment – two years into what will likely be a long and difficult evolution – are immense. Debates and divisions suppressed for decades are resurfacing. Institutions are being held accountable for the first time. Young people are impatient for reform and results. Citizens and governments are negotiating democratic rules of the road.

In the countries that gave rise to the Arab Awakening, 2012 witnessed a bumpy transition from protest to politics, brutal repression by regimes determined to crush popular will, and the inevitable challenges of turning democratic aspirations into reality. While there were encouraging democratic breakthroughs in some cases, other countries saw the erosion of protections for civil society, sexual violence against women, violence against and increased marginalization of members of religious minorities, and escalating human rights violations, especially in Syria. Each of the nations of the region will follow its own path, but those governments that do not respond to the aspirations of their own people will have difficulty maintaining the status quo.

In Syria, the Asad regime continued to brutalize its people. The government conducted frequent police and military operations against peaceful civilians, including attacks on funeral processions, breadlines, schools, places of worship, and hospitals, and continued to use

indiscriminate, disproportionate, and deadly force to terrorize the Syrian population into submission. Sexual violence was widespread. According to the UN, as many as 70,000 people have died since the beginning of the Syrian crisis, and the number of deaths had increased from around 1,000 per month in the summer of 2011 to an average of more than 5,000 per month by July 2012.

In addition to supporting the Asad regime and terrorist organizations outside its borders, the Government of Iran continued to severely restrict the rights of its own citizens. The government committed acts of politically motivated violence and repression, targeting journalists, students, lawyers, artists, women, ethnic and religious activists, and members of their families. According to NGO reports, the government executed a total of 523 persons in 2012, many after trials that were secret or did not provide due process. Prosecutors often charged persons arrested for political and human rights-related activities with *moharebeh*, “enmity towards god,” a vague and overly broad charge that carries the death penalty. The government promulgated new and sweeping restrictions on women’s activities, education, and employment.

Bahrain remained at a crossroads at the end of 2012. The government took some steps to implement the recommendations in the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) report. However, the most important recommendations addressing fundamental inequalities in Bahraini society were unfulfilled at year’s end, and sectarian tensions continued to rise.

In addition to the crackdowns on NGOs in Egypt, 2012 saw increasingly targeted sexual violence against women, the failure of security forces to protect Coptic Christians from several incidents of societal violence, impunity for many of the perpetrators, and increasing political polarization. The latter trend led to widespread protests for and against the president's efforts to declare his actions temporarily above judicial review and to expedite enactment of a controversial new constitution, which was adopted in a hastily organized December referendum.

Encouragingly, 2012 saw Libyans and Egyptians participate in contested and credible elections for the first time in decades. Tunisia held on to many of the historic gains towards sustainable democracy made in 2011, and the National Constituent Assembly conducted an open and inclusive constitutional-drafting process. Libya's newly elected government, meanwhile, struggled to assert control over local militias and extremist violence, which claimed the lives of four Americans, including the U.S. Ambassador, in Benghazi in September.

The sweeping change set off by the frustrations of a single Tunisian fruit vendor in late 2010 will play out in different ways over the coming decades. The transition to democracy in the region will not be linear, and there surely will be setbacks. But it is important to analyze these changes with a longer view of history and a steady commitment to work with the people of this region in their quest to build free, democratic, inclusive, and stable societies.

Emergent democratic transition in Burma

With sustained U.S. diplomatic engagement in 2012 that culminated with a Presidential visit, Burma continued to take significant steps in a historic transition toward democracy, beginning with the release of more than 300 political prisoners in January. Since 2011 the government has released more than 700 political prisoners, many of whom had been imprisoned for more than a decade. In April, Burma held largely transparent and inclusive parliamentary by-elections, in which the National League for Democracy party, chaired by Aung San Suu Kyi, took 43 of 45 contested seats and Aung San Suu Kyi was elected to parliament. Beyond elections, the Burmese government has opened new space for civil society by relaxing press censorship and allowing trade unions to form and register.

However, Burma's transition is not yet complete. Many elements of the country's authoritarian structure -- repressive laws, pervasive security apparatus, corrupt judiciary, restrictions on freedom of religion, and dominance of the military -- remain largely intact. Considerable work is essential to ensuring that the 2015 national elections are free and fair. Inter-ethnic violence claimed at least 100 lives and displaced tens of thousands in Rakhine State in June and October, while armed conflict continued in Kachin State. The work of overcoming deep divisions encouraged by decades of manipulative authoritarian rule and building a pluralistic democratic society that resolves differences peacefully is urgent. It will require government action to protect the human rights of all individuals in Burma, and it will require real leadership from influential religious, political, and community figures. Trafficking in persons persisted -- particularly of women and girls -- as did discrimination against ethnic minorities and stateless persons. Recruitment of child soldiers continued, although the government signed an action plan under UN auspices to address the issue. Forced labor, including that of children, continued.

Mindful of the challenges that persist, Burma's progress is the result of years of hard work by the Burmese people and sustained U.S. and international pressure to reform. This progress underscores the impact of principled engagement in support of long-suppressed demands from Burma's citizens for universal rights. Ultimately, Burma's future will be determined by the Burmese people, but its democratic transition, if successful and fully implemented, could serve as an example for other closed societies.

Freedom of expression, including by members of the media, and Internet freedom

Sustainable democracy means more than elections. As President Obama said at the United Nations in September, true democracy "depends on the freedom of citizens to speak their minds and assemble without fear and on the rule of law and due process that guarantees the rights of all

people.” These elements of democracy -- particularly the freedom of expression -- faced serious threats in 2012 in countries around the world.

At the same time, increased access to information and new means of communication proved to be game changers, particularly in closed societies where people face restrictions on their fundamental freedoms of peaceful assembly and association. In the DPRK, for instance, the government has sought to control all sources of information, but North Koreans risk punishment in order to obtain illegal radios, cell phones, and other multimedia devices that can increase their ability to communicate with each other and to a limited extent with the outside world.

When accessible, social media amplifies individual voices and allows ordinary citizens to expose wrongdoing, organize collective action, call for accountability, or crusade for respect and tolerance. For example, in the Philippines, activists came together through social media and in other fora to protest a cybercrimes law that allowed persons found guilty of libelous comments online, including comments made on social networks, to be fined or jailed. Following the protests, the Supreme Court suspended implementation of the law. This kind of engagement leads to free and open debate about issues that people care about in their communities and presents governments with opportunities and ideas for reform. Unrestricted reporting by the media -- in all its emerging forms -- has never been more vital to the functioning of democratic societies.

2012 was a very difficult year for traditional media. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) reported that the total number of imprisoned journalists increased by 53 from 2011, reaching a record of 232 journalists in prison, the highest such figure since CPJ began tracking in 1990. International human rights NGOs identified Turkey, holding at least 49 journalists behind bars because of their work, as the country with the greatest number of imprisoned reporters. The International Press Institute (IPI) counted 133 journalists killed in the line of duty or as a consequence of their reporting in 2012, making it the deadliest year for journalists since IPI began tracking in 1997. In addition, many governments passed laws or manipulated the legal environment to stifle criticism and dissenting views, and imposed burdensome taxes and fees on independent media.

In Ecuador, for example, President Correa called the press his “biggest enemy” and used his public appearances to make personal attacks on specific journalists. During his weekly television and radio address, Correa encouraged government officials and private individuals to bring cases against the media, which led to increased media self-censorship. New laws, including a ban on any coverage that might directly or indirectly favor one candidate, philosophy, or political theory limited the ability of the media to cover the election. The government also reportedly used tax and labor inspections to close several media outlets and harass companies that published reports critical of the government.

Other governments used efforts to counter terrorism or extremism as a pretext for suppressing freedom of expression. The Government of Ethiopia used antiterrorism legislation as a basis for prosecuting journalists. For example, courts found journalists Woubishet Taye, Reyot Alemu, and Eskinder Nega, who were arrested in 2011, as well as six journalists/bloggers tried in absentia, guilty of charges under the antiterrorism proclamation in separate cases. In total, courts convicted 31 persons, including journalists, opposition members, and activists, under the antiterrorism proclamation during the year. At the end of 2012, Kazakhstani courts used a sweeping application of a vague law against “inciting social discord” to ban several media groups.

In some countries, governments took steps to restrict Internet freedom through new legislation, the harassment of bloggers and online activists, and arrests for peaceful expression in a single tweet or text message. In Vietnam, authorities increasingly detained and imprisoned dissidents who used the Internet to criticize the government and publish ideas on human rights and political pluralism. At least 14 activists were convicted and sentenced to lengthy prison terms during 2012. In Kuwait, the authorities investigated dozens of cases involving citizens accused of slandering the Amir on their Twitter accounts; one who was convicted in June was given a five-year prison sentence. In the United Arab Emirates, a new cybercrimes law included provisions reinforcing that existing excessive limitations on freedom of expression extended to online communication, including social media.

Marginalization of members of vulnerable groups

Democracy demands universal rights and protections for all individuals so they have the chance to participate in the economic and political lives of their communities. Commerce flourishes, instability declines, and nations are uplifted when they draw on the contributions of their entire societies. Yet in too many places, governments continue to persecute, or allow the persecution of, members of religious and ethnic minorities; women; lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people; persons with disabilities; migrants; and members of other vulnerable populations, including tribal communities.

China continued to implement repressive policies -- including official restrictions on the freedoms of expression, religion, association, and movement -- against ethnic Uighurs and Tibetans. Members of these two communities experienced great difficulty acquiring passports, effectively limiting the ability of many of them to travel outside the country. In addition, government monitoring and disruption of telephone and Internet communications were particularly widespread in Tibetan and Uighur areas. Human rights abuses escalated around high-profile events, such as the visit of foreign officials, sensitive anniversaries, and in the period leading up to the meeting of the 18th Party Congress in November.

Anti-Semitism remained a significant problem in many countries, including in the Middle East, Europe, and Latin America in 2012. Religious and political leaders throughout the Middle East made anti-Semitic statements in their public remarks, and in Egypt President Morsi was criticized for saying “Amen” during prayers in Mansoura after an imam stated, “Oh Allah, grant us victory over the infidels. Oh Allah, destroy the Jews and their supporters.” Overtly anti-Semitic and xenophobic political parties maintained seats in parliament in Hungary and Greece. Representatives of such parties made anti-Semitic remarks in public discourse, including a call on the floor of the Hungarian parliament for the creation of a list of Jewish government officials (promptly condemned by the government), reading from the “Protocols of the Elders of Zion” on the floor of the Greek Parliament, and anti-Semitic and extremist remarks by political parties leading up to the October elections in Ukraine. Many of these same political parties were also conspicuous for political attacks on Roma communities and on immigrants, especially from Muslim countries. In Venezuela, numerous anti-Semitic statements were linked to the government. In addition, at times the government-controlled media contained anti-Semitic statements, some directed at political opponents.

Many countries around the world continue to criminalize consensual same-sex activity, and LGBT people remained the targets of widespread discrimination and violence. In Uganda, draft anti-homosexuality legislation seeks to impose punishments ranging from imprisonment for “homosexuality,” meaning certain acts or “related offenses,” to death for individuals twice convicted of “homosexuality.” At the end of 2012 the bill was pending before parliament, with some local religious leaders urging parliament to pass the bill.

Persons with disabilities also faced continued challenges in 2012, notably the lack of anti-discrimination legislation in many countries, leaving them excluded from schools, jobs, public transportation, elections, health care, and public buildings. In countries where laws were in place, they were often inadequate or not enforced, ending in the same result.

Migrant workers across the globe faced employment and societal discrimination, lack of sufficient legal protections, harassment in the workplace, and, in some cases, severe vulnerabilities to labor exploitation, including forced labor. In particular, migrant domestic workers rarely enjoyed internationally recognized labor rights and often did not have the ability to remove themselves from danger or to seek legal assistance or remediation.

Women and girls were the target of continued violence and discrimination in 2012, some of which was state-sponsored. State security forces and rebel and militia groups perpetrated widespread and sometimes mass rape of women and girls in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, particularly in the North Kivu, South Kivu, and Orientale provinces. Sexual violence was an extremely grave problem in the Syrian conflict. Although the situation in Afghanistan

marginally improved during the year, Afghanistan remained a very dangerous country for women, as well as members of other vulnerable groups, and violence continued to threaten gains made over the past ten years in securing human rights and space for civil society in the country. Women active in public life were targeted by the Taliban and other insurgent groups in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, including 14-year-old Malala Yousafza, who was shot in the head in October for advocating for the right of Pakistani girls to go to school.

The *2012 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* document these cases and hundreds more in 199 separate reports. Immediately following are country sketches, organized by region, highlighting human rights developments in countries of particular interest on the global stage.

2012 Country Highlights

Africa

Continuing conflict in the eastern **Democratic Republic of Congo**, exacerbated by weak civilian control over state security forces, the absence of credible governance, a continuing cycle of impunity, external support to armed groups, and the ensuing proliferation of other armed groups, contributed to significant abuses, including unlawful killings, disappearances, torture, rape, and arbitrary arrests and detention. Rebel militia groups, some of which received significant external support, exploited internal conflicts and committed violent abuses against civilians, particularly in North Kivu, South Kivu, and Orientale provinces. These abuses included unlawful killings, disappearances, torture, the recruitment and use of child soldiers, and gender-based violence, including mass rapes. Despite some modest improvements, impunity for human rights abuses remained a severe problem in both the security services and elsewhere in the government. Authorities did not prosecute or punish the great majority of abusers.

In March and April, armed groups seized control over northern **Mali**. An estimated 500,000 Malians were displaced as a result, with many fleeing to southern Mali or neighboring countries. On March 22, the armed forces overthrew the civilian government of President Amadou Toumani Toure. Junta soldiers committed serious human rights abuses, including arbitrary arrests and detention, beatings, and torture. Additional abuses were committed in the north by rebel groups, al-Qa'ida linked terrorists, and other Islamist militants, including sexual violence, summary execution, the use of child soldiers, amputation of hands and feet of suspected thieves, intimidation of journalists, and the destruction of ancient monuments.

Nigeria continued to struggle with serious abuses attributed to the sect of militant extremists collectively known as Boko Haram, which conducted killings, bombings, kidnappings, and other attacks throughout the country, resulting in numerous deaths, injuries, and the widespread destruction of property. The sect claimed responsibility for coordinated assaults on multiple targets in Kano on January 20; the suicide bombing of churches in Kaduna and Jos on April 8; the suicide bombings of the *This Day* newspaper offices in Abuja and Kaduna on April 26; the kidnapping and killing of British, Italian, and German hostages; the bombing of multiple churches, police stations, banks, and other civilian targets in Bauchi, Jos, and Kaduna states; and the assassination of government, religious, and traditional figures throughout the year. In their attempts to combat Boko Haram, security forces also committed serious human rights violations, including extrajudicial killings, torture, rape and arbitrary detention. Impunity was widespread at all levels of government, including among police and security forces.

The **South Sudan** report documents a challenging human rights situation in the world's newest country. Serious issues included security force abuses, lack of access to justice, and conflict-related abuses, including continuing abuse and displacement of civilians due to clashes between Sudanese and South Sudanese forces, rebel militia groups, and ethnic communities. The

government rarely punished military or civilian officials who committed abuses, and impunity was a major problem throughout the country. The government restricted the movement of members of NGOs, and NGO workers were sometimes attacked and harassed. Authorities also harassed and detained members of human rights groups and political parties, as well as journalists. On December 5, prominent journalist Isaiah Diing Abraham Chan Awuol (pen name Isaiah Abraham) was shot to death at his home in Juba, becoming the first journalist killed in South Sudan since it gained independence in 2011.

In **Sudan**, conflict between government and rebel forces in Darfur, Blue Nile, and Southern Kordofan states continued and resulted in serious human rights abuses committed by all parties, including the killing of an estimated 1,637 people in Darfur during the year. Heavy fighting also continued in Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile states between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N). Fighting, insecurity, bureaucratic obstacles, and government and rebel restrictions reduced the ability of peacekeepers and humanitarian workers to access conflict-affected areas. Lack of access and fear of government retribution reduced reporting on human rights violations, especially sexual violence and other types of gender-based violence. Protests against the government in June and July prompted renewed crackdowns against political parties and civil society. Security forces harassed human rights groups, journalists, religious minorities, NGOs and political parties, often subjecting citizens to arbitrary arrest, detention and torture.

East Asia and Pacific

The human rights environment in **China** continued to deteriorate in 2012. Human rights related issues included a crackdown on human rights activists, increasingly harsh repression in ethnic Tibetan and Uighur areas, greater efforts to censor online expression, and onerous restrictions on the operations of civil society. Individuals and members of groups seen as politically sensitive by the authorities continued to face tight restrictions on their freedom to assemble, practice religion, and travel. Efforts to silence some political activists and public interest lawyers increased, and authorities continued widespread use of extralegal measures including enforced disappearance, "soft detention," and strict house arrest, as well as the systemic use of laws to silence dissent and punish individuals --- and their relatives and associates -- for attempting to exercise the fundamental freedoms of expression, assembly, and association. Public interest law firms that took on sensitive cases continued to face harassment, disbarment of legal staff, and closure. In the Tibetan Autonomous Region, authorities increased repression and restrictions on religious freedom and the number of Tibetans committing self-immolation continued to rise.

Human rights conditions in the **Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK)** remained deplorable. Defectors continued to report extrajudicial killings, disappearances, arbitrary detention, arrests of political prisoners, and torture. The judiciary was not independent and did

not provide fair trials or due process. The DPRK government continued to control almost all aspects of citizens' lives, denying freedoms of expression, including for members of the press, religion, assembly, and association. Reports continued to surface that the government severely restricted freedom of movement and subjected its citizens to forced labor. The government also continued to maintain a vast network of political prison camps, in which conditions were harsh and life-threatening.

In **Vietnam**, human rights conditions deteriorated in 2012. Authorities restricted freedom of expression, imprisoned dissidents using vague national security legislation, harassed activists and their families, and disregarded the rule of law. The government continued to restrict citizens' political rights, particularly their right to change their government, and further limited privacy rights and the freedoms of the expression, including for members of the press, assembly, association, and movement. The government also further restricted the exercise of these freedoms online, continued to be involved in attacks against critical Web sites, and spied on, fined, arrested, and convicted dissident bloggers, including Le Quoc Quan, Nguyen Van Hai (Dieu Cay), Ta Phong Tan, Pham Tran Hai (Anh Ba Saigon), Dinh Dang Dinh, and others. Freedom of religion continued to be subject to inconsistent interpretation and protection, with significant problems continuing, especially at provincial and village levels. The government limited the workers' right to freedom of association by interfering with their ability to form and join independent unions and did not enforce safe and healthy working conditions effectively.

Europe

In **Belarus**, power remained concentrated in the presidency, the September 23 elections failed to meet international standards, and the inability of citizens to change their government remained a significant problem. The government detained dozens of people during the year for political reasons. Authorities continued to commit frequent serious human rights abuses, including beating detainees and protesters, using excessive force to disperse peaceful demonstrators, and reportedly using torture and mistreatment during investigations and in prisons. The government continued to infringe on citizens' privacy rights and further restricted civil liberties, including freedom of speech, press, assembly, association, religion, and movement. Authorities harassed human rights groups, NGOs, and political parties, refusing to register many and then threatening them with criminal prosecution for operating without registration. There was discrimination against persons with disabilities, Roma, ethnic and sexual minorities, persons with HIV/AIDS, and those who sought to use the Belarusian language. Authorities harassed and at times dismissed members of independent unions, severely limiting the ability of workers to organize and bargain collectively, and did the same for lawyers who had represented persons charged with political offenses, thus diminishing the prospects of individuals to receive a fair trial.

The **Russia** report documents significant restrictions on civil liberties, violations of domestic electoral processes, the failure to respect due process and the rule of law in many parts of the country, and the continuation of particularly severe human rights abuses in the North Caucasus region. The parliament adopted a series of measures that curtailed civil liberties, including laws restricting NGOs, a law recriminalizing libel, a law that limits Internet freedom by allowing authorities to block certain Web sites without a court order, and amendments to the criminal code that dramatically expand the definition of treason. There were continued restrictions on press freedom, with the majority of broadcast outlets controlled either by the government or aligned corporations. Government authorities forbade the sale of several print publications and exercised pressure on editorial boards. In addition, domestic and international observers described the presidential campaign as skewed in favor of one of the candidates, and procedural irregularities marked voting on election day. Similar to the December 2011 Duma elections, there were reports of “carousel voting” in which voters with absentee ballots were shuttled to voting stations to cast multiple votes, a public relations and law enforcement campaign against the political opposition, and pressure on election monitoring groups. Regional elections in October 2012 were also marred by official manipulation. Government restrictions on religious freedom included the use of extremism charges to ban religious materials and restrict the right of members of certain groups to assemble peacefully.

The ability of citizens to change their government was also a significant issue in **Ukraine** in 2012. The parliamentary elections on October 28 were characterized as a “step backwards” by domestic and international observers when compared to other recent national elections and were not fair or transparent. There was widespread abuse of government resources to favor progovernment candidates, harassment and intimidation of opposition candidates by the authorities, manipulation of election commissions, and substantial fraud and falsification during the tabulation of votes. The selective prosecution of former government officials remained a highly visible human rights problem, including the politically motivated imprisonment of the former prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko and the former interior minister Yuriy Lutsenko, who were also barred from standing as candidates in the parliamentary election. The government also increased interference with and pressure on media outlets, including tolerating increased levels of violence toward journalists.

Near East

In **Bahrain**, citizen protests continued throughout 2012. Some protesters engaged in lethal acts of violence against security forces, including the use of improvised explosive devices, Molotov cocktails, and other improvised weapons. Security forces committed arbitrary arrest and detention of protesters, with some reports of torture in detention and arbitrary or unlawful killings. The country made some progress toward implementing a number of the recommendations of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) and the government

prosecuted some police officers implicated in abuses during 2012 and in 2011. The government undertook significant efforts to ensure the reinstatement of thousands of workers dismissed following the 2011. Freedom of expression suffered from a climate of intimidation and harassment and from the arrest of individuals on charges of slandering politicians and government officials. However, the lack of due process in trials of political and human rights activists, medical personnel, teachers, and students, some of which resulted in harsh prison sentences, was a significant problem.

On June 17, Mohamed Morsi became **Egypt's** first democratically elected president in a vote widely considered to be credible and fair, but Egypt continued to face significant human rights challenges in 2012. President Morsi issued constitutional declarations on August 12 and November 22. The August declaration abrogated a June 18 constitutional declaration by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) that granted it sweeping executive and legislative authorities and ceded these authorities to President Morsi; the November 22 declaration removed executive decisions from judicial oversight. On December 25, voters approved a new constitution by popular referendum following an expedited process that limited input from political opposition and religious minorities. The new constitution provides ambiguous protections for religious freedom and appears to limit the right to practice religion to adherents of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. Other human rights problems included the erosion of women's rights, failure to protect members of minorities, including members of religious minorities, from violence and failure to prosecute the perpetrators. The new constitution and previously imposed laws that the new government enforced restricted freedoms of speech and association, and the new government failed to replace previously imposed discriminatory laws pertaining to church construction. There continued to be deaths as the result of large-scale clashes between rival groups of demonstrators, "thugs", and security forces, with little accountability for abuses. On December 6, individuals affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood and the ruling Freedom and Justice Party broke up a sit-in opposing the president outside the presidential palace, leading to approximately 12 hours of violence among rival demonstrators and "thugs" in which 10 persons were killed and several dozen anti-Morsi demonstrators were detained and severely beaten, according to media and NGO reports. The government meanwhile brought criminal charges against persons it alleged blasphemed or denigrated religions, government figures, and the Prophet Muhammad and also indicted persons on legally vague charges including "harming national unity." A restrictive NGO law continued to hinder freedom of association.

The human rights situation in **Iran** remained very poor in 2012. The government continued its crackdown on civil society, which has progressively intensified since the 2009 presidential elections. Throughout the year, authorities arrested numerous journalists, students, lawyers, artists, and ethnic and religious activists. The judiciary continued to impose harsh sentences against those who participated in oppositionist or pro-reform demonstrations. The government committed extrajudicial killings and executed persons for criminal convictions on minor

offenses, sometimes in public or group executions. Citizens remain unable to change their government through free and fair elections. The government severely restricted freedoms of speech, assembly, association, and religion and significantly increased its surveillance and monitoring of citizens' online activities by blocking or filtering content and detaining numerous Internet users for content posted online. Security forces under the government's control committed acts of politically motivated violence and repression, including torture, beatings, and rape. Iran's government also sought to increase violent repression outside its borders by continuing to assist the Syrian government's brutal crackdown against its own people.

Libya held historic parliamentary elections on July 7, generally adjudged to have been fair, competitive and transparent, and experienced a peaceful transition of power from the Transitional National Council to an elected parliament. A new prime minister was sworn in on November 14. While the fall of Qadhafi ended an era of systematic, state-sanctioned human rights violations, the legacy of decades of erratic dictatorship, non-existent governing institutions, widespread militia activity, and international isolation severely hindered government efforts to enforce the rule of law and consolidate authority country-wide. Widespread deadly violence, reportedly motivated by revenge, intra-militia rivalries, and extremist inflows, continued to be a serious problem, with the victims primarily Libyans. In Benghazi alone there were 21 killings of current and former military officials, many of them defectors from the Qadhafi regime. After several attacks targeting foreign diplomats and international organizations in Western Libya, a September 11 terrorist attack on the U.S. mission in Benghazi resulted in the death of four Americans, including Ambassador Chris Stevens.

The human rights situation in **Syria** became increasingly dire in 2012. The Asad regime continued to use indiscriminate and deadly force to quell protests and terrorize the Syrian population into submission, including through military assaults on residential areas throughout the country. For example, beginning in mid-April, the regime attacked civilians in funeral processions, breadlines, schools, places of worship, and hospitals throughout the country, asserting these were rebel safe-havens. A UN estimate indicates that nearly 70,000 people have died since the beginning of the Syrian crisis in March 2011. The UN also found that the number of deaths increased from around 1,000 per month in the summer of 2011 to an average of more than 5,000 per month in July 2012. The government denied citizens their right to peacefully change their government and to freedoms of speech, movement, association, and access to legal representation, and medical assistance. Government security forces, progovernment militias, and antiregime armed groups engaged in abuses, including kidnapping, detention, rape, and torture, although the overwhelming preponderance of these abuses were committed by the Syrian Government.

South and Central Asia

Afghanistan continued to be wracked by widespread violence in 2012, with women and children bearing the brunt of the suffering. Serious human rights problems included credible allegations of extrajudicial killings, torture, and abuse of detainees by national security forces. The Taliban and other insurgents killed record numbers of civilians using improvised explosive devices, car bombs, and suicide attacks. The Taliban also increasingly used children as suicide bombers, including in a September attack against the NATO compound in Kabul. Antigovernment elements also threatened, robbed, and attacked villagers, foreigners, civil servants, and medical and NGO workers. Despite some improvements, endemic violence and societal discrimination against women and girls remained a serious problem. Women were arbitrarily arrested and detained for so called “moral crimes,” including running away from home. In many cases the police did not prevent or respond to the violence and in some cases arrested women who reported crimes committed against them, such as instances of rape. Disregard for the rule of law and official impunity for those who committed human rights abuses were serious problems, and the government was inconsistent in its efforts to prosecute official abuses.

In **Kazakhstan**, 2012 witnessed backsliding on freedom of expression, including by the media. The government used a variety of means, including restrictive laws, police harassment, licensing regulations, Internet restrictions, and criminal and administrative charges to exert pressure on the media, some opposition groups, and NGOs, thereby restricting freedom of expression and the ability of these groups to operate. Judicial actions against journalists, media outlets, some opposition groups and NGOs, including libel suits filed by government officials, contributed to an environment characterized by widespread self-censorship.

In **Pakistan**, the most serious human rights problems in 2012 included extrajudicial killings, forced disappearances, and torture. Violations of religious freedom and discrimination against members of religious minorities continued. Violence, abuse, and social and religious intolerance by militant organizations and other nongovernmental actors contributed to a culture of lawlessness in some parts of the country, particularly Balochistan, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas. The failure to arrest or prosecute perpetrators of such violence contributed to a climate of impunity. Corruption was widespread within the government and the police forces, and the government made few attempts to combat the problem. Rape, domestic violence, sexual harassment, “honor” crimes and other harmful traditional practices, including acid-related violence and forced marriages, and discrimination against women remained serious problems. Child abuse and commercial sexual exploitation of children persisted and widespread human trafficking, including forced and bonded labor, was a serious problem.

The government of **Sri Lanka** continued to tighten its grip on power in 2012. Significant human rights violations took place during the year and the government made little meaningful effort toward reconciliation with the Tamil minority community. The president exercised authority

under the 18th Amendment to the Constitution to maintain control of appointments to previously independent public institutions that oversee the judiciary, police, and human rights protection. Denial of fair public trial remained a problem and during the year the government took steps to impeach the chief justice of the Supreme Court. At year's end, the Appellate Court was preparing to hear arguments on the Constitutionality of Parliamentary oversight of the judicial branch. Persons allegedly tied to the government attacked and harassed civil society actors, journalists, and persons viewed as Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam sympathizers. Involuntary disappearances continued and the government did not account for thousands who disappeared in prior years. Widespread impunity for a broad range of human rights abuses, particularly involving police torture, attacks on media institutions and the judiciary, and sexual violence remained a serious problem. Security forces and government-allied paramilitary groups committed unlawful killings in predominantly Tamil areas. Discrimination against the ethnic Tamil minority continued, and a disproportionate number of victims of human rights violations were Tamils.

In **Uzbekistan**, the executive branch under the president continued to dominate political life and exercised nearly complete control over the other branches of government. Abuse and torture by security forces, lack of due process and fair trial, and widespread restrictions on religious freedom continued during the year. Restrictions on freedoms of speech, including members of the press, assembly, and association remained serious problems, and government-organized forced labor of individuals in cotton harvesting continued. The government instituted and, with few exceptions, enforced a ban against participation of children under 15 in the 2012 cotton harvest. There were credible reports of forced child labor, mostly involving college and lyceum students ages 15-18. In October, several press outlets reported on the death of 18-year-old Navruz Islomov in Kashkadaryo Region. The reports alleged that Islomov died from a beating administered by police officers who confronted him as he attempted to leave the cotton fields; authorities confirmed the death but denied police brutality was the cause. In March, courts in Tashkent convicted independent journalists Elena Bondar of "inciting hatred" and Viktor Krymzalov of "libel" for Internet publications whose authorship Bondar and Krymzalov denied. Courts fined the journalists \$3,750 and \$1,350, respectively. Independent observers noted violations of due process and procedural deficiencies during the trial of Bondar, who left the country in June after facing additional harassment. Authorities subjected human rights activists, journalists, and others who criticized the government to harassment, arbitrary arrest, and politically motivated prosecution and detention, which led three civil society activists to leave the country during the year.

Western Hemisphere

Cuba remains under the control of an authoritarian regime, in which the Communist Party is the only legal party and "the superior leading force of society and of the state." The right of citizens

to change their government remained abridged and the government maintained severe limitations on speech, press, and academic freedoms and severely restricted Internet access. Politically motivated and at times violent short-term detentions reached record levels in 2012 and the government employed threats, intimidation, mobs, and harassment to prevent free expression and peaceful assembly. The Cuban Commission on Human Rights and Reconciliation counted approximately 6,600 short-term detentions during the year, compared with 4,123 in 2011. At year's end, the government continued to refuse calls for an independent investigation into the July 22 car crash that killed prominent opposition leader Oswaldo Paya. Authorities interfered with privacy and engaged in pervasive monitoring of private communications. The government refused to recognize independent human rights groups or permit them to function legally. In addition, the government continued to place severe restrictions on worker rights, including the right to freedom of association. Most human rights abuses were official acts committed at the direction of the government, and consequently the perpetrators enjoyed impunity for their actions.

In **Honduras**, the justice system remained weak and impunity remained a serious problem. Police, government agents, and former members of the security forces committed unlawful killings, but the government took steps to prosecute and punish officials who committed abuses and made substantial efforts to advance institutional reforms to increase accountability. There were reports of killings of agricultural workers, bystanders, private security guards, and security forces related to land disputes in the Bajo Aguan region. Prison conditions were harsh and at times life-threatening, due to overcrowding, violence, and abuses by prison officials. On February 14, a prison fire claimed the lives of 361 prisoners in Granja Penal de Comayagua, department of Comayagua. On March 29, 13 prisoners died in a riot at the penitentiary in San Pedro Sula.

The Government of **Venezuela** continued to politicize the judicial system and impede freedom of expression, including for members of the press. The government did not respect judicial independence or permit judges to act according to the law without fear of retaliation. The government used the judiciary to intimidate and selectively prosecute political, union, business, and civil society leaders who were critical of government policies or actions. The government harassed and intimidated privately owned television stations, other media outlets, and journalists throughout the year, using threats, fines, property seizures, targeted regulations, and criminal investigations and prosecutions. On August 10, the NGO The Press and Society Institute (IPYS) reported that individuals identified with former President Hugo Chavez's United Socialist Party of Venezuela assaulted news teams from the independent Televen and Venevision television networks who were covering protests by opposition students in San Cristobal, Tachira State. Televen reported that the attackers sabotaged their recording and verbally abused its news team. Venevision claimed the attackers assaulted and kicked their cameraman, his assistant, and a correspondent. There continued to be anti-Semitic references in government-affiliated media.