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Exploiting Terrorism as a Pretext for Repression

Venezuela jails opposition political figures as terrorists. Russia and China put critics in psychiatric hospitals.

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Democracy has been under threat around the world for many years from authoritarian rulers, military leaders and terrorist groups. Last year the pressures intensified significantly.

Vigorous debate over how democracies should respond to terrorism is under way in Europe, Australia and North America. Elsewhere, however, leaders cite the threat as a pretext to silence dissidents, shutter critical media and smother civil society. Thus Venezuela imprisons opposition political figures such as Leopoldo López as terrorists, and China invokes terrorism to support harsh prison sentences against nonviolent Uighur activists. But the exploitation of the terrorist threat is just one aspect of a general trend by repressive regimes toward heavy-handed tactics.

Unlike during the Cold War, autocrats in recent decades have favored more nuanced methods for protecting their monopolies of power—such as elections that are free but not fair. The aim was to maintain a veneer of democratic pluralism and avoid practices associated with 20th-century dictatorships.

Over the past year, authoritarian regimes began to abandon their quasi-democratic camouflage. The most blatant example is Russia's invasion of Ukraine, whose official justifications included irredentist claims reminiscent of Soviet-era land grabs. China's government responded to public discontent with campaigns reminiscent of the Mao era, including televised confessions that have gained prominence under President [Xi Jinping](#). Both China and Russia have made use of a chilling instrument from the height of communism, the placement of opposition activists such as Russia's Mikhail Kosenko or the Chinese farmer Xu Lindong in psychiatric hospitals.

Meanwhile, rulers in Egypt and other Middle Eastern countries have resorted to police

brutality, sham trials and severe sentences as they seek to annihilate political opposition. In Egypt the courts sentenced more than 500 defendants to death in connection with riots in which one police officer was killed.



Venezuelan opposition leader Leopoldo López after turning himself in for arrest in Caracas, Feb 18, 2014.

PHOTO: AFP/GETTY IMAGES

One especially ominous trend is increased military involvement in political affairs. In Thailand the military coup leaders have made clear that a timely return to democracy is unlikely. In Egypt the government has severely limited the work of civil society organizations and placed the armed forces' actions beyond the reach of the courts. In Venezuela the military is involved in the economy, social programs and internal security, and U.S. prosecutors have accused senior military officers of involvement in drug trafficking.

In "Freedom in the World 2015," our annual country-by-country survey of political rights and civil liberties, nearly twice as many countries suffered declines as registered gains in 2014. And the gains are at their lowest point in years. The report cites Russia's invasion of Ukraine, repression in Egypt under President Abdel Fattah Al Sisi, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's campaign against press freedom and an independent judiciary, and further centralization of authority in China as evidence of a disdain for even paying lip service to democratic standards.

In countries such as Iraq, Syria, Pakistan and Nigeria, radical jihadists have massacred security forces and civilians, taken foreigners hostage, and killed or enslaved religious minorities, including Muslims. Teenage girls were seized as war prizes, schoolgirls raped, and women educators and health workers assassinated. And the spike in terrorism was concentrated in countries with widespread corruption, inept governance and weak or nonexistent democratic institutions.

These illiberal states variously exhibit feckless, brutal or complicit security services. The Syrian regime of Bashar Assad opened the door to extremist movements by repressing first peaceful protesters, then the rebel groups that rose to defend them. Nouri al-Maliki, prime minister of Iraq until his resignation in August, presided over a government that smoothed the path of Islamic State by persecuting opposition leaders and fostering cronyism in the security forces. The Sisi government conducted a remorseless drive to eliminate the Muslim Brotherhood, indirectly contributing to the formation of an Islamic State affiliate in Egypt.

In Nigeria, neither the government nor the military has proved capable of dealing effectively with the Islamist Boko Haram. The military is poorly equipped, hollowed out by graft, and prone to scattershot tactics that fail to distinguish between terrorists and civilians. Pakistan's intelligence services have a long history of colluding with certain extremist groups, including some, such as the Pakistan Taliban, that are responsible for mass killings, including 150 people, mostly children, at the Army Public School in Peshawar.

For millions, terrorism and the blunt instruments of dictatorship were the dominant developments of a horrible year. Still, massacres are not the tactics of the self-assured. Likewise for those whose response to criticism is to tighten the screws.

Not so long ago the system set in place by Venezuela's Hugo Chávez was touted as a template for governments across Latin America; it now stands as a textbook case of dysfunction. One year ago, Time magazine named Vladimir Putin as its Person of the Year, a tribute to his strongman image and diplomatic success. Today Mr. Putin's model of petro-authoritarianism is regarded as a prescription for failure. Freedom's adversaries have wreaked havoc around the world. But current appearances aside, they do not represent the wave of the future.

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