

INTERNATIONAL DEMOCRACY

with research from Small Planet Institute Democracy Interns



At a time when our democracy is deeply threatened, the need for a strong citizen's movement is clear. We can—and should—celebrate the growing momentum of domestic resistance. It's no small feat that nearly 7 million people across the U.S. showed up at October's #NoKingsDay protests—a sign that our numbers are growing. It is a promising start, but it will take even more coordinated effort and citizen participation to defeat the deep threats of Trump's authoritarian actions. For inspiration, and practical takeaways, let us look globally.

From Iceland to Tunisia, citizen-led democracy movements are taking place worldwide now and in recent history. Despite varying degrees of success across these movements, they demonstrate the power of citizens to stand against corruption and inequality, as well as the strength of a united polity.

In this mini-report, we highlight seven recent or ongoing movements from around the globe. These are organized by the country's global freedom rating as determined by Freedom House, which scores access to political rights and civil liberties in 208 countries and territories in its annual Freedom in the World Report.

The US scores 84/100. Some of the countries we highlight here score far above us—true beacons for strong democracy—while others are still fighting for basic democratic systems and norms in their governments. We believe all of these case studies have value and that there is real ground for inspiration from both those in nascent democracies to those pushing a well-established system to improve—and from every place in between.



Global Freedom Rating:

Iceland: 95/100

Taiwan: 94/100

US: 84/100

Timor-Leste: 72/100

India: 63/100

Nepal: 62/100

Armenia: 54/100

Tunisia: 44/100

ICELAND

Background: Since 1929, Iceland's Independent Party has consistently secured the largest share of votes in every election. However, grievances over the party's economic policies began to emerge during the early 2000s. The government gave special privileges to firms, privatized banks, deregulated the economy, and lowered corporate tax rates without extending similar benefits to citizens. The situation deteriorated dramatically in 2008 when several banks collapsed, leading to widespread discontent, as the country plunged into a financial crisis and unemployment soared.

Protests against the government erupted in October 2008 and escalated over the following months, driven by four key demands: 1) the resignation of the Prime Minister and cabinet, 2) the resignation of the Central Bank's board, 3) the resignation of the Financial Security Authority's board, and 4) immediate new elections.

Tensions reached a boiling point on January 20th, 2009, when thousands of protestors gathered, banging pots and pans against the Parliament building, demanding that the government resign. The movement became known as "The Kitchenware Revolution". After three days of increasingly violent protests, the Prime Minister and his cabinet resigned, prompting calls for new elections in May. Although protests continued into February, with some Governors of the Central Bank resisting resignation, the Icelandic Parliament began drafting new laws to reform the Central Bank. By the end of the month, the new laws were signed, forcing all the previous governors to resign and allowing for the appointment of a new Governor and Deputy Governor.

In May of 2009, Iceland elected a more progressive government dedicated to addressing the people's needs, appointing Social Democrat Johanna Sigurdardottir as the nation's first female Prime Minister and the world's first openly gay head of government. Serving from 2009 to 2013, Sigurdardottir played a pivotal role in stabilizing Iceland's economy and began efforts to draft a new constitution. Many viewed this constitutional reform as essential to the nation's post-crisis transition. A Constitutional Council was established in April 2011 to oversee the revision process, producing weekly drafts for public review and engaging citizens in discourse through social media, earning the label "crowdsourced constitution." The draft retained much of the original 1944 constitution's emphasis on parliamentary democracy while expanding rights and civil liberties. However, as new elections approached in 2013, legal critiques of the constitution mounted, leading to the decision to halt its progression.

Today: Under the leadership of newly elected Prime Minister Kristrún Mjöll Frostadóttir, a Social Democrat, and the country's youngest Prime Minister, attention has shifted towards comprehensive welfare reforms. Iceland continues to struggle to obtain broad political support to ratify a new constitution.

Impact: The radical changes driven by the Kitchenware Revolution are a powerful example of how protest can transform government. Iceland stands out as the first country to undergo such significant changes in its government as a direct consequence of a financial crisis. The ongoing process of constitutional revision further illustrates democracy as a dynamic dialogue between the people and their government, emphasizing the importance of including every voice in the conversation.

TAIWAN

Background: Taiwan, located off the southeastern coast of China, has a complex history marked by foreign rule. After Japan's victory in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-95), Taiwan became a Japanese colony. Following Japan's defeat in World War II, the island came under the control of the Republic of China, ruled by the nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) party and Chiang Kai-shek.

The arrest of a contraband cigarette vendor in Taipei on February 27th, 1947, sparked widespread protests against the KMT government, an event known as the "228 Incident". This uprising highlighted Taiwanese opposition to the corruption of Chiang's Nationalist government and called for local representation and greater autonomy. The KMT's response was brutal, as they executed many leading protesters, including students, lawyers, and doctors.

After the KMT's defeat by Mao Zedong's Communist Party, and their subsequent retreat to Taiwan in 1949, political repression intensified, marking the onset of the "White Terror" and a period of martial law that lasted for four decades. Nevertheless, activists continued to advocate for democracy, freedom of expression, and an end to one-party rule. In the 1970s, the "outside the party" (dangwai/党外) movement emerged, uniting independent candidates and activists who published the *Formosa* magazine, calling for freedom of the press and an end to martial law. However, proponents faced severe violence, and many organizers were detained, beaten, or sentenced.

The public demonstrations and trials of the dangwai activists contributed to the eventual easing of martial law. Soon after, the KMT began allowing non-KMT candidates to participate in national elections, resulting in dangwai candidates winning 25 percent of the votes in the legislature. The leading figures of *Formosa* played key roles in establishing the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), the first opposition party to the KMT. Martial law was finally lifted in 1987, driven by significant economic growth, diminished international standing, and increased political activism. Taiwan held its first democratic elections in 1996, and the first non-KMT candidate, Chen Shui-bian, was elected in 2000, having played a pivotal role in supporting the protests of the dangwai organizers in the 1970s.

Today: The history of Taiwanese democratization and the legacy of the White Terror are increasingly relevant amid growing Chinese opposition. The 228 Incident has become a rallying cry for Taiwanese independence, as China's President Xi Jinping continues to increase economic, military, and diplomatic pressure on Taiwan to reunify. In 2019, Xi Jinping reiterated China's "one country, two systems" proposal, outlined in the 2005 "Anti-secession Law", which has also been applied to Hong Kong. In the 2024 election, President Lai Ching-te of the DPP asserted that China has no right to rule over Taiwan, while emphasizing a desire for constructive dialogue between the two sides. Taiwan also maintains observer status in many international organizations and operates under its own constitution and currency. Despite China's continued military buildup, aimed at intimidating Taiwan, the United States and other nations remain committed to Taiwan's defense, as demonstrated by Washington's Taiwan Relations Act, which mandates support for Taiwan's defense.

Impact: Taiwan's democratic movement established a new status quo of an independent nation. After many decades of protest met with violent suppression, citizens prevailed and the nation's democracy now outpaces ours.

TIMOR-LESTE

Background: Timor-Leste (East Timor) was a [Portuguese colony](#), beginning as a trading post in the 1600s. Following a [coup in Lisbon](#) in 1974, Portugal initiated a policy of decolonization and withdrew from Timor-Leste. In 1975, [Indonesia invaded Timor-Leste](#) under the pretext of fighting communism, labelling the Timorese independence movement as communist. The end of the Cold War diminished Western support for Indonesia's occupation, and a growing global emphasis on self-determination and human rights increased pressure on Indonesia to relinquish control.

Simultaneously, a strong independence movement emerged in Timor-Leste, led by figures such as Xanana Gusmao and Jose Ramos-Horta, who was awarded the [Nobel Peace Prize](#) in 1996 for his advocacy. Conflict between pro-Indonesia militia and pro-independence groups resulted in the deaths of approximately [200,000 East Timorese](#), from fighting or starvation.

In 1999, amid global pressure and domestic political turmoil, the [foreign ministers of Indonesia and Portugal](#)--the latter still recognized by the UN as the legal administrator of the territory--agreed to hold a [UN-run referendum](#) to determine Timor-Leste's future. Voters were asked whether they wished to integrate with Indonesia under a system of autonomy or become independent. In September, the UN announced that [78.5%](#) of voters chose independence, prompting anti-independence militia to launch a campaign of terror that killed hundreds and devastated communities. [Australian-led peacekeeping forces](#), under UN oversight, helped restore order, and by October, the Indonesian parliament formally renounced its claim to Timor-Leste.

From [1999 to 2002](#) the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) was established to oversee administrative functions and assist in building capacity for self-governance until official independence was achieved in 2002. Pro-independence leader [Gusmao](#) became the first president of Timor-Leste in 2002, overseeing the nation's admission to the [UN in 2002 and to ASEAN in 2005](#). Following independence, UNTAET was succeeded by the United Nations Mission of Support in East Timor (UNMISSET), which continued to support administrative structures and help maintain political stability. The last UN peacekeeping mission left Timor-Leste in [2012](#).

Today: In the most recent election in 2023, Timor-Leste experienced a smooth transfer of power and the formation of a stable government. The incumbent president, [Francisco 'Lu-Olo' Guterres](#) and the [Fretilin party](#) lost in both the 2022 presidential and 2023 parliamentary elections, with independence leaders [Gusmao and his party winning the parliamentary election](#), while [Jose Ramos-Horta was reelected as president](#). In September, protests broke out in response to a controversial [\\$4.2 million proposal to purchase SUVs](#) for lawmakers and establish a lifetime pension for members of parliament and public officials. Demonstrators called for the reallocation of funds to vital sectors such as agriculture, health, and education. After thousands rallied, parliament responded to public pressure and unanimously agreed to cancel the SUV purchase and the pension plan.

Impact: While democracy in Timor-Leste is far from perfect, it stands as a valuable example today for several reasons. First, the nation had no democratic history prior to its independence in 1999. Despite economic challenges, it *remains* the only Southeast Asian democracy... *continued on next page*

ranked “fully free” by Freedom House. The country has experienced relatively high voter turnout, equitable representation in government, and strong protection of civil rights. The September protests are a further demonstration of democracy’s potential to drive meaningful policy change. Through a strong national identity, a pluralist system, and a commitment to democratic institutions, Timor-Leste’s story highlights that, even as democracy erodes in nations around the world, countries can still strive to build and sustain democratic governance.

INDIA

Background: In 2020, the Indian government enacted three controversial laws aimed at liberalizing trade in agricultural products. These laws enabled trade beyond state-run Agricultural Produce Market Committee (APMC) markets (mandis), established a framework to facilitate direct engagement between farmers and buyers, and granted the Central Government authority to regulate food prices for stability. However, many farmers perceived these reforms as a threat to their livelihoods, fearing the elimination of wholesale markets and guaranteed prices. This discontent led to widespread protests, unprecedented in scale and duration over the past several decades. Farmers marched to the capital and set up camp, demanding that the government address their grievances. Compounding this frustration, India had entered a recession due to the COVID-19 pandemic, ending years of economic growth. Over the following months, the protests resulted in hundreds of casualties and numerous failed negotiation attempts, yet the demonstrators remained steadfast on their demands. Ultimately, the protests concluded when Prime Minister Narendra Modi repealed the three acts, offered compensation to victims of the protests, and promised to consider a minimum support price on goods.

Today: Despite the repeal of the laws, by 2024 there was still no established minimum support price for farmers, fueling renewed frustration and leading to further protests. Farmers have expanded their demands to include not only a minimum support price but also a commitment from the government to honor a promise to double their incomes and ensure at least 50% profit margin over their production costs, alongside several additional reforms. These protests arose at a critical moment, coinciding with upcoming elections in April and May, when Prime Minister Modi was anticipated to seek a third term. However, he has been notably less responsive to the farmers’ concerns even as electoral support from this significant voter bloc began to wane. While Modi was able to successfully secure a third term, his party failed to achieve an outright parliamentary majority, a consequence of the dissatisfaction among the farming community. Protests continued into 2025, while farmers await fulfillment of their demands. However, some progress has been made, including the approval of increased minimum support prices for Rabi Crops for 2026-2027. Additionally, during a session of the Rajya Sabha, Union Agriculture Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan publicly assured farmers that the government would purchase all agricultural goods at the minimum support price.

Impact: The 2020-2021 protests by Indian farmers show the power of citizen action to facilitate real policy change, the repeal of three laws. Although all the demands of the protesters have not yet been met, the ongoing determination of the farmers has put increasing pressure on the government to concede to their demands. The influence of the farmers in the election further reflects the power the public holds when they come together to create change.

NEPAL

Background: The early 21st century was a transformative period in Nepal's history during which instability and a Maoist insurgency led to the abolishment of the monarchy in 2008 and the creation of a republic. However, the expected stability that would come from this governmental transition never materialized, and Nepal has since then not had a government complete a full-year term, resulting in distrust and political unrest.

Today: In early September of 2025, Nepal faced deep political unrest. In an attempt to silence dissent, the government banned 26 social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and X (Twitter). Before the ban, discontent with traditional government parties had been growing, especially among younger Nepalis who were frustrated by corruption, inequality, and lack of accountability. However, the ban led to a new wave of protests that quickly turned deadly when police began firing tear gas and rubber bullets to break up crowds. Protesters retaliated by setting fire to the Supreme Court, Parliament, Prime Minister's residence, and the President's private home. The government tried to repeal the ban, but it was already a catalyst for the people's hunger for more complete political reform. KP Sharma Oli was forced to resign as Prime Minister. The recent protests have been the most widespread since Nepal became a democratic Republic in 2008. They have also given rise to royalist groups in Nepal eager to restore the monarchy that was abolished in 2008. On September 5th, however, Gen Z protesters met with military officials and appointed Sushila Karki, former Chief Justice of Nepal's Supreme Court, as leader of an interim government. Karki is Nepal's first female Chief Justice and is known for being an anti-corruption activist and challenger of traditional government. Most recently, Karki's interim government reached a 10-point agreement with Gen Z organizers that included relief for affected families, an inquiry into protest-era abuses, and plans for broader political and constitutional reforms.

Impact: The Gen Z-led reform movement in Nepal exemplifies the power of young generations to fight for their rights and play an active role in their government. The backing of significant political figures like Karki will help to bring to life the changes desired for a new fair and representative republic. The political turmoil that ensued further sent shockwaves through Nepal's neighbors, India and China, warning these nations of the power of citizens to stand against corruption.

ARMENIA

Background: In 2015, President Serzh Sargsyan and his party made a constitutional change shifting the presidential government into a parliamentary system. But as Sargsyan was about to conclude his second presidential term, he announced he would run as Prime Minister in 2018 under the new system. Using the constitutional change, President Sargsyan was able to avoid the traditional two-term limit for presidents and retain power. If he were elected, President Sargsyan would be serving, in effect, a third term under a new title of Prime Minister. Opponents rallied to stop this autocratic threat. Led by former political prisoner Nikol Pashinyan, protestors rallied in a march two weeks before the election. As they made their way across the country, it became a mass mobilization. Tens of thousands joined the cause. Still, even after two weeks of marching and protesting, Sargsyan claimed to win the Prime Minister seat. A few days later, Sargsyan arrested Pashinyan alongside hundreds of demonstrators. But this only led to more rebels turning against the Prime Minister, including the military. Pashinyan was released, and Sargsyan resigned his role the next day. Pashinyan was then elected as the new Prime Minister.

Today: Since 2018, Armenia has made significant efforts to counter corruption and enhance inclusive suffrage and access to justice. In November 2024, for example, the cabinet had the highest female representation in history. However, there is still much work to be done as the country has experienced a decline in credible elections, judicial independence, and predictable enforcement. Prime Minister Pashinyan similarly has talked about adopting a new constitution, “reform of reforms,” which he sees as a critical development in democratizing Armenia, creating a system where people feel they play a role in the law of the state.

Impact: The 2018 protests in Armenia are an example of a united people defeating what they saw as a threat to their freedoms and the integrity of their democracy; they successfully took down the long-standing political elite. The continuing efforts on behalf of Pashinyan and the Armenian people to reform their government are a reminder that creating a functioning and fair democracy is an ongoing effort requiring dedication and public participation.

TUNISIA

Background: The story that lit the Middle East and North Africa region ablaze in 2010 is well known. On December 17th, 2010, a Tunisian street vendor lit himself on fire as a protest against the corruption of the police and government. His frustration encapsulated widespread public opinion of the Tunisian dictator, President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. Within hours after the act of self-immolation, students and young activists began protests in the streets. Protesters eventually made their way to the capital and continued to show up for weeks. They used social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to disseminate news of their uprising and encourage broader action. Following the protests in Tunisia, similar movements arose across the Arab states, labeled the “Arab Spring”. On January 14, 2011, the Tunisian dictator fled: a major victory. More recently, in 2014, Tunisia adopted a new democratic constitution, in which Islamists, Leftists, and Liberals came together to shape the country's political future. A constitution very unlike many other Arab states, dedicated to protecting the rights of citizens and even guaranteeing freedom of religion and equality between men and women.

Today: Since President Kais Saied’s 2019 election, there has been an increasing overextension of executive power and a removal of many of the democratic reforms. Most recently, this crackdown has intensified with the arrest of leading opposition figures, including Nejib Chebbi, Ayachi Hammami and Abir Moussi, which has further fueled nationwide outrage. Citizens have already taken to protesting throughout this past year. One of the biggest groups protesting right now is Tunisia's powerful Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT), who bring attention to a decline in union rights and civic freedoms, as well as the ongoing economic crisis. Many of the protests are occurring in the same spots as the 2011 Arab Spring protests that led to the fall of President Ali, including the most recent protest on Saturday December 13th.

Impact: Through united citizen-led protests, Tunisia toppled its authoritarian power and opened the space for new freedoms and a chance for democracy. The success of the Arab Spring protests and the initial transition from autocracy to democracy is a testament to citizen action and the ability of a people to stand up to a dictatorship, as well as utility of social media as a 21st century organizing tool. Although now Tunisia faces many of the same issues that plagued the country before the Arab Spring, today’s renewal in citizen movements is a reflection of increasing citizen commitment to democratic freedoms. The process toward democratic government and revolutionary reform, as exemplified by Tunisia, is not a linear battle but a never-ending commitment by the public to fight for their rights.

Around the globe, citizens are showing that large-scale change is possible. From Iceland to India, dedicated activists have joined to fight for stronger democracies. Along the way they've faced all kinds of pushback from deeply embedded political systems to violent military and government response, but they've persevered and made real strides. As our nation faces our own flagging democracy, we know we must rise to the occasion. These citizens movements serve as beacons, inspiring our own struggle for change.

