The world’s most, and least, democratic countries in 2022

The Economist’s global democracy index shows several authoritarian rulers tightened their grip

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The long decline of global democracy stalled in 2022, according to the latest edition of the Democracy Index from our sister company, EIU. The annual survey rates the state of democracy across 167 countries on the basis of five measures with a maximum score of ten—electoral process and pluralism, the functioning of government, political participation, democratic political culture and civil liberties. The latest edition finds that almost half (45.3%) of the world’s population live in a democracy of some sort, while more than a third (36.9%) live under authoritarian rule (see map). The global score of 5.29 out of ten, a rise of just 0.01 from the previous year, represents stagnation rather than a reversal of the democratic recession that began in 2016, which had seemed probable.
One reason why a bounceback was expected was the lifting of pandemic-related restrictions in 2022. The widespread suppression of individual liberties, initially intended to protect people from covid-19, dragged down scores in 2020 and 2021. But any improvements in 2022 were offset by negative developments elsewhere. Moreover, China—home to nearly a fifth of the world’s population—only ended its zero-covid policy in December, having locked up tens of millions of its citizens for months at a time throughout the year. The government abandoned the zero-covid policy after widespread protests against it. But the state’s repressive response to those protests helped drag China’s democracy score down to 1.94 out of ten, its lowest since the index began in 2006.
Russia recorded the biggest democratic decline of any country in the world, falling 22 places down the ranking to 146th. Vladimir Putin’s ambition of restoring Russia’s position as an imperial power is fiercely opposed by the West, but the condemnation by non-Western countries is by no means universal. Around two-thirds of people live in countries whose governments are either neutral or Russia-leaning. Mr Putin’s propaganda machine is attempting to persuade the global south that the West’s goal is to “divide and destroy” Russia. In Russia itself, the state’s firm grip on the media and crackdown on anti-war protestors contributed to an all-time low score of 2.28.
Polarisation remains the biggest threat to democracy in America, although historically high turnout at the midterm elections in November and a broad rejection of candidates who still deny the results of the 2020 presidential election helped the country’s score remain steady at 7.85. Further south, a bungled coup by Peru’s (since ousted) president, Pedro Castillo, weakened an already unstable democracy. The index now classifies Peru’s government as a “hybrid regime” rather than as a democratic one.

Elsewhere, multiple coups caused Burkina Faso to fall 16 places down the ranking. Failed coup attempts in Guinea Bissau, São Tomé and Príncipe and the Gambia contributed to stagnation in the democratic scores of sub-Saharan Africa for the second year in a row.
Western Europe, home to eight of the top ten countries in the index, was the only region to register a marked improvement in 2022. Its regional score rebounded to pre-pandemic levels, and Norway retained its long-held position at the top of the rankings, closely followed by four other Nordic countries. (New Zealand came second in the global ranking.) Turkey, the only “hybrid regime” in the region, has recorded a steep decline over the past decade, which reflects the increasingly autocratic rule of its president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The country faces a crucial election this summer that could decide its democratic status. Despite some global improvement, democracy remains under threat.