



Hong Kong, Switzerland, New Zealand Rank Highest in 2016 Human Freedom Index

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In a free society, personal autonomy, civil liberties, and economic freedom are inextricably intertwined. [“The Human Freedom Index”](#) is an annual publication from the [Cato Institute](#), the [Fraser Institute](#), and the [Liberales Institute of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom](#) that aims to provide a careful measurement of the inherently valuable role that freedom plays in human progress. In the 2016 rankings, [the top five freest countries in the world across all categories are Hong Kong, Switzerland, New Zealand, Ireland, and Denmark](#), while the least free are Libya, Yemen, Iran, Syria, and the Central African Republic.

“A central purpose of this report is to get a general but reasonably accurate picture of the extent of overall freedom in the world,” write [index authors Ian Vásquez and Tanja Porčnik](#). “A larger purpose is to more carefully explore what we mean by freedom and to better understand its relationship to any number of other social and economic phenomena. This research could also help us more objectively observe the ways in which various freedoms—be they economic or civil, for example—interact with one another. We hope that this index will become a resource for scholars, policymakers, and interested laypersons alike, and that its value will increase as it is regularly updated, thus allowing us to observe numerous relationships through time.”

The index “uses 79 distinct indicators of personal and economic freedom” to compare 159 countries across the globe. Although there are a several indices that compare worldwide economic freedom, a unique component of the Human Freedom Index is its measurement of personal freedoms, including the rule of law, security and safety, movement, religion, association and assembly, expression, and relationships. Each of these general categories consist of several more detailed aspects.

“This too we believe provides an advance over other freedom indices, which fail to account for the interaction between the rule of law and security on the one hand and specific freedoms on the other,” [Vásquez and Porčnik](#) write. “Without the rule of law and security, specific freedoms cannot in a practical sense be lived out. The rule of law and security are essential to provide reasonable assurance that life is protected. Security and safety are fundamental for survival and for the exercise of a vast array of freedoms. The rule of law, by providing predictable order and

reducing arbitrary conduct by the authorities, further facilitates an environment in which freedoms are safeguarded. Without security or the rule of law, liberty is degraded or even meaningless.”

The authors note that states with an outsized focus on security can also empower the government to violate individual rights in the name of increased safety, so the index requires a country to attain higher scores on both security and civil liberties in order to achieve better overall index rankings.

There can be wide variance between levels of freedom in different countries within the same global region, Vásquez and Porčnik point out, so a section of the index ranks regional economic freedom. Western Europe, Northern Europe, and North America all place highest on the regional index, with the Middle East and North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, and South Asia ranking lowest.

“The Human Freedom Index ... looks increasingly important at a time when the world’s leading market democracies struggle with economic problems and when hybrid forms of authoritarianism are being sold as viable alternatives to liberalism,” Vásquez and Porčnik conclude. “Over time, this index could track not only specific gains and losses of freedom; it could also help to see what links may exist between the assortment of freedoms and other variables. What are the relationships among personal freedom, economic freedom, and democracy at different levels of development? Are some types of freedom, economic or personal, more conducive to the spread and sustenance of other freedoms? What is the relationship between various measures of human well-being (including income) and changes in personal freedom? Under what conditions are increases or decreases in freedom likely to come about? Delving into those and innumerable other questions that the data may help us to answer will surely lead to a better understanding of the role of freedom in human progress.”