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Hope remains as tide of global freedom recedes

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Is the world losing its taste for freedom as we move further into 2019?

Two recent reports confirm the perception that freedom is under attack globally.

The Human Freedom Index, a joint project of Canada's Fraser Institute, the U.S.-based Cato Institute and Germany's Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom, measures freedom on a zero to 10 scale, where 10 is most free.

The index is the first to include all dimensions of freedom: of expression, religion, movement, association and economic, and whether these freedoms are equally extended to women and the LGBTTTQ* community. It also incorporates the rule of law and personal safety, necessary conditions for freedom.

New Zealand, at 8.89, achieves the highest score and Syria (3.77) the lowest. Canada scores 8.57 and ranks fifth, compared to 8.39 for the United States, ranked 17th, little changed over the past decade.

But the global picture is worrisome.

Over the index's effective range, the difference between New Zealand and Syria, freedom has declined by 15 per cent between 2008 (the earliest available comprehensive data) and 2016 (the most recent). Of the 142 jurisdictions with data in 2008 and 2016, 81 declined in freedom, 58 increased and three were unchanged.

This finding of declining freedom dovetails with new research in the Fraser Institute's Economic Freedom Report.

The research — by Pál Czeglédi of University of Debrecen, Hungary's oldest university, and Carlos Newland of Instituto Universitario ESEADE and Universidad Torcuato Di Tella in Argentina — examines international support for economic freedom, the ability of individuals to make their own economic decisions, unfettered by overly powerful government or greedy cronies.

They mine World Values Survey responses on attitudes that underpin economic freedom and thus free markets. Those include: whether competition is good or bad, whether private property should be increased or government nationalization expanded, whether wealth is gained at the expense of others or increases prosperity for all, and whether individuals should take responsibility for their decisions and the consequences.

From this, they analyze attitudes to economic freedom and compare surveys taken in two periods, the first between 1989 and 1994 and the second between 2010 and 2014. In the first period, 29.4 per cent strongly supported free markets compared to just 11.2 in the second period

— almost a two-thirds decline. Of the 51 countries that have data in both periods, support for free markets declined in 50, with support growing only in the United Kingdom — by a smidgen.

This could signal bad news for overall freedom and democracy because economic freedom is the cornerstone of both. As Leon Trotsky famously put it, "In a country where the sole employer is the state, opposition means death by slow starvation. The old principle: 'who does not work shall not eat,' has been replaced with a new one: 'who does not obey shall not eat.'"

To be a bit more subtle, where governments or crony elites control people's ability to get a job or promotion, put a roof over their head, travel and, yes, eat, the powers that be have immense tools to suppress freedom. You speak out, you lose your job or worse.

Economic freedom, on the other hand, liberates people from dependence on the powerful so they can make their voices heard and build better lives without fear. Virtually all countries that restrict economic freedom and crush free markets create miserable, unfree, undemocratic lives for their citizens, with Venezuela, once the darling of the left, now the poster country for disaster.

The opposite holds for countries with greater economic freedom, which almost universally have high levels of civil freedom within a stable, tolerant democracy, even when they began poor and undemocratic, such as Taiwan (compare its success to China's suppression), South Korea or Botswana, among many others.

The free market zone includes Nordic countries, which are often falsely called socialist. While Nordic countries have unusually large governments, free-market principles provide the foundation for their economies. They are great free traders, boast business- and entrepreneur-friendly regulations and law, and vigorously protect property rights.

Support for free markets is highest in Nordic countries and the Anglosphere (New Zealand, Canada, the U.S., the U.K. and Australia).

Is a retreat from freedom inevitable?

History provides hope. A wave of democracy and freedom began building globally in the 19th century, only to recede after the First World War. A second wave began after the Second World War, but retreated as communism expanded. The fall of communism launched a third grand wave.

Freedom is now in retreat, but the crest of each new wave was higher than the proceeding wave as the failures and violence of dictatorships of left and right became evident to all but brainwashed believers.

The hope now is that history will repeat itself.