

# THE Messenger

## From other editors: Fight against despotism continues

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Freedom comes and goes in waves, but each wave crests higher and each trough sinks a bit less than the previous one. That's the analysis of Fraser Institute fellow Fred McMahon, and it provides a hopeful note to the awful news that freedom seems to be on the wane worldwide.

We hope this ever-rising analysis is true. Regardless, however, the current trend ought to set off alarm bells.

The 2018 version of the Human Freedom Index, published jointly by the Cato Institute, Canada's Fraser Institute and Germany's Liberales Institute, was released earlier this month. It shows that despite world history being filled with evidence of the awful things that accompany it, despotism is on the rise. Authoritarian leaders, promising enticing visions of law and order, efficient government and a return to some imagined past glory, seem to be popping up all over.

Russia, Hungary, Turkey, Greece, Argentina and Egypt have seen notable declines. The countries at the top and bottom of the list are no surprise. New Zealand and Switzerland are the world's freest. Venezuela and Syria bring up the rear. But the United States comes in a troubling 17th — although that represents a step up from previous surveys.

The report is important because it measures freedom, or the lack of coercive constraint, by 79 different indicators. One of its large subcategories is religious freedom, which has become an acute concern worldwide.

Other recent surveys have monitored the decline in religious freedom. Last summer, the Pew Research Center published its ninth annual study on restrictions on worship in 198 countries, concluding that high levels of government-imposed anti-religious activity are on the rise. Using 2016 data (the most recent available), the study said 42 percent of the countries had high or very high levels of overall restrictions, whether from government or private actions, a dramatic rise from only 29 percent in 2007.

The Human Freedom Index puts it this way:

*“The exercise of religion can be both a supremely private matter involving a person's strongest beliefs and a social affair practiced in an organized way among larger groups. Restrictions on that fundamental freedom have been the source of some of the bloodiest and most drawn-out conflicts throughout history, and they continue to animate discord in numerous countries today.”*

While each of the study's metrics is important, religious freedom goes to the heart of human conscience. It is a basic and fundamental tenet of human dignity and liberty. Its suppression ought to be a warning sign, like the proverbial canary struggling to breathe in a coal mine, that trouble lies ahead.

We appreciate McMahon's optimistic view of the future, while noting that the tone of his insightful preface to the index is predominantly gloomy. He attributes the idea of freedom's steadily rising waves to philosopher Samuel Huntington. Newly freed people often have unreal expectations of how quickly prosperity will follow. This makes them vulnerable to politicians who claim to have a better way. When those promises fail, as they have recently in Venezuela and elsewhere, people desire a return to freedom with more realistic expectations.

*"Freedom,"* McMahon wrote, *"requires hard work and does not create overnight miracles."*

As the index indicates, that hard work never ends. Even when supposedly won, freedom requires constant vigilance from generation to generation.