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CHALLENGING AUTOCRACY FROM THE FRONT LINES

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In a new report, “Challenging Autocracy from the Front Lines,” Venezuelan opposition leader and former political prisoner Leopoldo López describes the increasing collaboration between authoritarian regimes through economic, military, diplomatic, financial, and technological partnerships designed to bolster dictatorships and repress pro-democracy movements. As a result, 2022 marked the 17 consecutive year of global democratic decline, according to Freedom House. Today, 72% of the world’s population lives under some form of autocracy, up from 49% in 2011.

The global alliance of autocrats is not ideological, López writes; it is an interest-based union designed to guarantee impunity for human rights violators, undermine domestic opposition groups in authoritarian states, and disrupt democracies. Iranian mullahs, Chinese communists, and Russian nationalists all recognize the value of sharing intelligence and providing diplomatic and military support.

In addition to describing the collaboration between authoritarian countries, López proposes the creation of an international alliance to foster a more effective defense of democracy. This alliance would include pro-democracy activists from authoritarian states and their allies in democratic governments and would be designed to facilitate political action.

The report also emphasizes the need to develop and deploy technologies to facilitate international financing for pro-democracy movements, and calls for coordinated actions to combat sanctions evasion and free political prisoners. Finally, it suggests more effective collaboration in international institutions in defense of democracy.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Building an Alliance for Freedom

We must build a global network of pro-democracy activists and democratic governments to work together, including in international institutions, to combat transnational authoritarianism.

2. Strengthening Non-violent Pro-Democracy Activism

We must engage in community building, mobilization, and training to improve non-violent pro-democracy activism.

3. Improving Sanctions Targeting and Enforcement

Instead of abandoning sanctions, we should rethink the way they are designed and enforced. We must target the enablers—the companies, individuals, and networks that support the world’s autocracies and abuse the financial systems of democratic nations.

4. Supporting Political Prisoners and their Families

We should identify effective methods for advocating for the release of political prisoners, with best practices for governments and for relatives and other allies of unjustly detained individuals.

5. Engaging the Private Sector in the Defense of Democracy

The ESG (environmental, social, and governance) framework should include “F” for “Freedom.” Corporations should avoid investments that benefit autocratic regimes.

6. Repositioning International Institutions

The UN and other international institutions have often been co-opted by autocrats. Democratic nations should use these institutions more effectively for the defense of democracy.

7. Expanding Access to the Internet and Smartphones in Closed Societies

New technologies such as Starlink can provide internet access in closed societies, which is critical for the mobilization of pro-democracy movements. The widespread distribution of smartphones would also enable activists to communicate effectively and more easily

receive international assistance.

8. Adopting Innovative Tools to Provide Financial Support

New digital currencies create opportunities for the direct transfer of funds to pro-democracy movements in autocratic countries, circumventing government controls.

9. Winning the Narrative

We should develop new ways to combat misinformation, share information in support of democracy and human rights, and raise awareness of the global autocratic network, the threat it represents, and how to counter it.