



## FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2021

# Tibet\*

NOT FREE

# 1

  
/100

<u>Political Rights</u>	-2/40
<u>Civil Liberties</u>	3/60

## LAST YEAR'S SCORE &amp; STATUS

1/100    **Not Free**

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. See the methodology.

\* Indicates a territory as opposed to an independent country.



# Note

*Freedom in the World* reports assess the level of political rights and civil liberties in a given geographical area, regardless of whether they are affected by the state, nonstate actors, or foreign powers. Disputed territories are sometimes assessed separately if they meet certain criteria, including boundaries that are sufficiently stable to allow year-on-year comparisons. For more information, see the report methodology and FAQ.

## Overview

Tibet is ruled by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) government based in Beijing, with local decision-making power concentrated in the hands of Chinese party officials. Residents of both Han Chinese and Tibetan ethnicity are denied fundamental rights, but the authorities are especially rigorous in suppressing any signs of dissent among Tibetans, including manifestations of Tibetan religious beliefs and cultural identity. State policies, including incentives for non-Tibetan people to migrate from other parts of China and the relocation of ethnic Tibetans, have reduced the ethnic Tibetan share of the population.

## Key Developments in 2020

- Beginning in January, Chinese government officials effectively leveraged the COVID-19 pandemic to close Buddhist temples and monasteries for many months. Authorities required temples and monasteries to participate in political indoctrination sessions and display political loyalty to the CCP in order to reopen after lockdown restrictions were lifted. The CCP also expanded the “intelligent temple management” system, often as another requirement for their reopening, and included enhanced video surveillance in all temples and monasteries.
- In June, the Chinese government enhanced the requirements for disabled Tibetans seeking jobs in government departments, as well as those who receive

state benefits, stipulating that they must denounce the Dalai Lama, abandon their political beliefs, and swear loyalty to the CCP. The new requirements fell in line with the government’s abusive “vocational training,” “labor transfer,” and “poverty eradication” campaigns that undermine Tibetans’ cultural and social identity and consolidate the CCP’s control over the region. By July, 543,000 Tibetans had received “vocational training.”

## Political Rights

### A. Electoral Process

**A1** 0-4 pts

**Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections?**

**0/4**

The Chinese government rules Tibet through administration of the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) and 12 Tibetan autonomous prefectures or counties in the nearby provinces of Sichuan, Qinghai, Gansu, and Yunnan. Under the Chinese constitution, autonomous areas have the right to formulate their own regulations and implement national legislation in accordance with local conditions. In practice, however, decision-making authority is concentrated in the hands of unelected ethnic (Han) Chinese officials of the CCP, which has a monopoly on political power. In 2016, Wu Yingjie replaced Chen Quanguo as TAR party secretary.

The few ethnic Tibetans who occupy senior executive positions serve mostly as figureheads or echo official doctrine. Che Dalha, one of two ethnic Tibetan members of the CCP’s 205-member Central Committee, has served as chairman (governor) of the TAR since January 2017. The chairman is formally elected by the regional people’s congress, but in practice such decisions are predetermined by CCP leadership.

**A2** 0-4 pts

**Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free**

and fair elections?

**O** / 4

The regional people's congress of the TAR, which is formally elected by lower-level people's congresses, chooses delegates to China's 3,000-member National People's Congress (NPC) every five years. In practice, all candidates are vetted by the CCP. The current TAR people's congress held its first session in January 2018, and the current NPC was seated that March.

**A3** 0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies?

**O** / 4

As in the rest of China, direct elections are only permitted at the lowest administrative levels. Tight political controls and aggressive state interference ensure that competitive races with independent candidates are even rarer in Tibet than in other parts of the country. Regulations published in 2014 placed significant restrictions on candidates for village elections, excluding those who have attended religious teachings abroad, have communicated with overseas Tibetans, or have relatives studying at monasteries outside China.

## B. Political Pluralism and Participation

**B1** 0-4 pts

Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings?

**O** / 4

All organized political activity outside the CCP is illegal and harshly punished, as is any evidence of loyalty to or communication with the Tibetan government in exile, based in Dharamsala, India.

The exile government includes an elected parliament serving five-year terms, a Supreme Justice Commission that adjudicates civil disputes, and a directly elected prime minister, also serving five-year terms. Votes are collected from the Tibetan diaspora around the world. The unelected Dalai Lama, the Tibetan spiritual leader who also traditionally served as head of state, renounced his political role in 2011. Lobsang Sangay was elected prime minister in the same year, replacing a two-term incumbent and becoming the exile government's top political official; he was reelected in 2016.

**B2** 0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?	0/4
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As in China as a whole, the one-party system structurally precludes and rigorously suppresses the development of any organized political opposition. Tibet has never experienced a peaceful and democratic transfer of power between rival groups.

**B3** 0-4 pts

Are the people's political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means?	0/4
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The authoritarian CCP is not accountable to voters and denies the public any meaningful influence or participation in political affairs.

**B4** 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities?	0/4
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Political opportunities for ethnic Tibetans within Tibet remain limited by the dominance of ethnic Chinese officials in top-level and strategic party and government positions, while ethnic Tibetans are restricted to lower-level and rubber-stamp positions. Engagement by ethnic Tibetans on local community issues is vigorously suppressed and harshly punished.

Women are well represented in many public-sector jobs and CCP posts within the TAR, though most high-level officials are men, and women are unable to organize independently to advance their political interests.

## C. Functioning of Government

**C1** 0-4 pts

**Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government?**

**0** / 4

As elsewhere in China, unelected CCP officials determine and implement government policies in Tibet. Constitutionally, the TAR, like other ethnic minority regions, should enjoy greater autonomy than other provinces, but in practice it is controlled even more tightly by the central government.

In March 2018, the CCP Central Committee announced significant structural reforms that reduced the already limited separation between the party and state governance, placing CCP entities—like the United Front Work Department—more explicitly in charge of policy areas including religious affairs and ethnic minorities, which are especially relevant for Tibet.

**C2** 0-4 pts

**Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective?**

**1** / 4



Corruption is believed to be extensive, as it is in China more generally, though little information is available on the scale of the problem.

There have been moves in recent years to curb graft among the region's officials as part of Chinese president Xi Jinping's nationwide anticorruption campaign. However, many prosecutions are believed to be politically selective or amount to reprisals for perceived political and religious disloyalty. Tibetan residents who seek to expose official misdeeds have been jailed. For example, anticorruption activist Anya Sengdra of Qinghai Province was arrested in September 2018 and sentenced in December 2019 to seven years in prison on vague charges of disturbing social order.

**C3** 0-4 pts

<b>Does the government operate with openness and transparency?</b>	<b>0 / 4</b>
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Governance is opaque in all of China but even more so in Tibet. A study by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, published in 2017, ranked cities and counties nationwide by their level of government transparency; Lhasa, the capital of the TAR, scored lowest among the cities, and the TAR's Nang county was the lowest among the counties under examination.

## ADDITIONAL DISCRETIONARY POLITICAL RIGHTS QUESTION

**Is the government or occupying power deliberately changing the ethnic composition of a country or territory so as to destroy a culture or tip the political balance in favor of another group? -3 / 0**

The Chinese government accelerated policies that reduce Tibetans as a proportion of the population and undermine their cultural and religious identity in 2020. The implementation of the "2019-2020 Farmer and Pastoralist Training and Labor

Transfer Action Plan” continued, forcing tens of thousands of additional Tibetan farmers and nomads to give up their land rights, become wage laborers, and move to urban areas where they are crowded into large apartment blocks. While the Plan’s stated goal is to alleviate rural poverty, in practice it has alienated tens of thousands of Tibetans from their cultural way of life, means of livelihood, and connection to the land. Government policies also continue to incentivize ethnic Chinese in-migration, further eroding Tibetans’ distinct cultural and religious identity. Tibetans are being forced to give up their land-use rights and turn them over to state-run collectives. Military-led “vocational training” is used for political indoctrination and to pressure participants to abandon their religious beliefs and “backward thinking.” According to 2020 official figures, 543,000 Tibetans had received “vocational training” by July.

In 2020, local officials were, for the first time, given specific quotas for the number of Tibetans they needed to enroll in vocational training programs. According to official statistics, at least 26,000 Tibetans in one county alone—Chamdo county—have been relocated from their land and moved to urban areas since 2016, while the government brought in thousands of Han Chinese workers, claiming they were needed for large infrastructure projects. As Han Chinese who move to the region do not typically change their household registration, their numbers are not reflected in official statistics. Hundreds of thousands of Tibetans forced into wage labor are dependent on the state for their income, and thus are subject to new rules issued in June requiring all those who receive state benefits, as well as state employees, to denounce the Dalai Lama, abandon their religious beliefs, and profess political loyalty to the CCP.

Authorities also use the creation of national parks in Tibet to further justify the forcible relocation of Tibetans from their ancestral land, with 4,000 people reportedly ordered to leave an area bordering Qinghai and Gansu Provinces before the end of 2020. May 2020 “ethnic unity” regulations, which promote intermarriage between Han Chinese and Tibetans through financial incentives, advance Sinicization policies and the dilution of Tibetan identity.

## Civil Liberties



# D. Freedom of Expression and Belief

**D1** 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media?	<b>0</b> /4
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Chinese authorities tightly restrict all news media in Tibet. Individuals who use the internet, social media, or other means to share politically sensitive news content or commentary face arrest and heavy criminal penalties. Tibetan cultural expression, which the authorities associate with separatism, is subject to especially harsh restrictions; those incarcerated in recent years have included scores of Tibetan writers, intellectuals, and musicians.

Deliberate internet blackouts occur periodically in Tibet, including in areas where public demonstrations have occurred. International broadcasts are jammed, and personal communication devices are confiscated and searched. The online censorship and monitoring systems in place across China are applied even more stringently in the TAR, while censorship of Tibet-related keywords on the popular messaging application WeChat has become more sophisticated.

The TAR is the only region of China that requires foreigners to get a special permit to enter, with foreign journalists regularly prevented from visiting. Journalists also face barriers to access Tibetan areas of Sichuan and other provinces, though no permission is technically required to travel to those places. Tibetans who communicate with foreign media without permission risk arrest and prosecution.

**D2** 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private?	<b>0</b> /4
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Freedom of religion is harshly restricted in Tibet, in large part because the authorities interpret reverence for the Dalai Lama and adherence to the region's unique form of Buddhism as a threat to CCP rule. New regulations on religious affairs came into effect in 2018, reiterating many existing restrictions and strengthening controls on places of worship, travel for religious purposes, and children's religious education, including in Tibetan areas.

The CCP's Central Committee, which absorbed the former religious affairs body in 2018, controls who can study in monasteries and nunneries and enforces a minimum age requirement of 18 for those who wish to become monks or nuns, although some institutions continue to accept younger children without registration. Monks and nuns are required to sign a declaration rejecting Tibetan independence, expressing loyalty to the government, and denouncing the Dalai Lama. Since 2012, the CCP has set up committees of government officials within monasteries to manage their daily operations and enforce party indoctrination campaigns. Police posts are increasingly common even in smaller monasteries. Possession of Dalai Lama-related materials—especially in the TAR—can lead to harassment, arrest, and punishment, including restrictions on commercial activity, loss of welfare benefits, and imprisonment.

Authorities took advantage of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 to further restrict and surveil Buddhist Tibetans. In order to reopen after COVID-19 restrictions were lifted, temples and monasteries were required to participate in political indoctrination sessions and expand the “intelligent temple management” system, which includes enhanced video surveillance in all temples and monasteries. Participants were required to study Xi Jinping Thought, a collection of Xi's statements; recognize the CCP's claim that China “liberated” Tibet; and denounce the Dalai Lama. A new June campaign of “behavioral reform” and an “environmental clean-up drive” removed Tibetan prayer flags, a cultural object that wards off evil spirits. Authorities also restricted Tibetans' access to important religious sites and places of worship. Months after construction work was completed in October around Jokhang Temple in Lhasa, Tibetan worshippers' access to the site was strictly controlled and many were denied entry. Chinese tourists—whose numbers reportedly quadrupled after COVID-19 restrictions were lifted, averaging around 4,000 per day at Potala Palace—enjoyed unfettered access.

The Chinese government has asserted its intention to select the successor of the current Dalai Lama, who turned 85 in July 2020, and has promoted its own appointee to serve as the Panchen Lama, a religious figure who plays an important role in identifying the reincarnation of a Dalai Lama, according to Tibetan Buddhist rituals. The location of the Panchen Lama, who was originally recognized by the current Dalai Lama, remains unknown after he was abducted by Chinese officials in 1995, when he was six years old.

### D3 0-4 pts

<b>Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination?</b>	<b>0/4</b>
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University professors cannot lecture on certain topics, and many must attend political indoctrination sessions. The government restricts course materials to prevent circulation of unofficial versions of Tibetan history and has reduced the use of Tibetan as the language of instruction in schools in recent years.

### D4 0-4 pts

<b>Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution?</b>	<b>0/4</b>
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Freedom of private discussion is severely limited by factors including authorities' monitoring of electronic communications, a heavy security presence, recruitment of informants, and regular ideological campaigns in Tibetan areas. In 2020, authorities in Tibet expanded the invasive security and censorship system that features pervasive video surveillance, use of facial recognition technology, "smart" identity cards, and integrated surveillance to track residents and tourists in real time. Hundreds of "security centers" were set up across the region, with more than 130 in Lhasa alone.

Ordinary Tibetans continued to be detained or sentenced to prison for actions like verbally expressing support for the Dalai Lama and freedom for Tibet, sharing images of the Dalai Lama or the Tibetan flag on social media, or sending information abroad

about recent self-immolation protests. In July 2020, Khando (or Khadro) Tseten was sentenced to seven years in prison on charges of “inciting state subversion” and “sharing state secrets” in connection with a song he composed that praised the Dalai Lama.

After the implementation of the 2017 Cybersecurity Law, authorities held meetings with managers of WeChat groups in Tibetan areas, warning them to ensure that online discussions remained “appropriate,” while informing residents at monasteries of the risks of sharing illicit information.

Estimates for the number of Tibetan political prisoners in detention in 2020 range from 500 to more than 2,000, according to US Congressional reports and the Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy, respectively.

## E. Associational and Organizational Rights

**E1** 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly?	<b>0</b> /4
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Chinese authorities severely restrict freedom of assembly as part of the government’s intensified “stability maintenance” policies in Tibet. Control and surveillance of public gatherings extend beyond major towns to villages and rural areas. Even nonviolent protesters are often violently dispersed and harshly punished. Nevertheless, Tibetans continue to seek ways to express dissatisfaction with government policies; sporadic solo or small-scale protests in public places persist, with participants briefly calling for the return of the Dalai Lama, the release of the Panchen Lama, or independence for Tibet, before being seized by police.

Abusive government policies and responses to those who self-immolate decreased the number of incidents in 2020. Officials have implemented information blackouts,

heightened the security presence, increased surveillance, and arrested those associated with self-immolators en masse. Engaging in self-immolation and organizing, assisting, or gathering crowds related to such acts are considered criminal offenses, drawing charges of intentional homicide in some cases. In addition to mass arrests, the government employs collective-punishment tactics—for both self-immolations and other forms of protest—that include financial penalties for protesters’ families, cancellation of public benefits for their households, and termination of state-funded projects in their communities.

## E2 0-4 pts

<b>Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights– and governance-related work?</b>	<b>0/4</b>
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Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are even more highly restricted in Tibetan areas than elsewhere. Even nonpolitical social and community engagement, including initiatives to promote the Tibetan language and to protect the environment, is harshly punished. Ten Tibetans, including two monks, from Sangchu county in Gansu Province were sentenced in June 2020 to prison terms ranging from 8 to 13 years for their efforts to block the construction of a slaughterhouse in their area and for demanding compensation for land confiscated for the project.

## E3 0-4 pts

<b>Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations?</b>	<b>0/4</b>
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Independent trade unions are illegal in Tibet, as they are in China as a whole. The only legal union organization is the government-controlled All-China Federation of Trade Unions, which has long been criticized for failing to properly defend workers’ rights. Labor activism in Tibet is riskier and therefore much rarer than in other parts of China. According to the China Labour Bulletin, no strikes were documented in the TAR during 2020, compared with some 800 labor actions, including strikes and sit-ins, elsewhere in the country.

## F. Rule of Law

**F1** 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary?	<b>0</b> / 4
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The CCP controls the judicial system, and courts consequently lack independence. Courts at all levels are supervised by party political-legal committees that influence the appointment of judges, court operations, and verdicts and sentences. Given the political sensitivity of Tibetan areas, the scope for autonomous judicial decision-making is even more limited than elsewhere in China.

**F2** 0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters?	<b>0</b> / 4
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Tibetans are routinely denied due process in criminal matters, including arbitrary detention, denial of family visits, long periods of enforced disappearance, solitary confinement, and illegal pretrial detention. Authorities often fail to inform families of the police detention, whereabouts, and well-being of loved ones. Businessman Tenzin Choephel, who had sought to raise awareness of environmental issues impacting Tibetan areas, has been detained since March 2018 and no information about his whereabouts had been released by the end of 2020. In a raid, police had found photos of the Dalai Lama in his home. Tibetans have even less access to legal representation of their choice than Han Chinese; lawyers seeking to defend them are routinely harassed, denied access to their clients, blocked from attending relevant hearings, and in some cases disbarred in retaliation. Trials are closed if state security interests are invoked, which sometimes occurs even when no political crime is listed.

**F3** 0-4 pts

Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies?	<b>0</b> / 4
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Detained suspects and prisoners are subject to torture and other forms of abuse. Tibetan prisoners of conscience have died in custody under circumstances indicating torture, and others have been released in poor health, allegedly to avoid deaths in custody. According to a partial database maintained by the US Congressional-Executive Commission on China, there were still hundreds of Tibetan political prisoners at the end of 2020.

Four Tibetans died in detention or immediately following their release in the first half of 2020. Many more Tibetans were released from custody in extremely poor health. A woman who had served a 15-month prison term, for sharing information about her nephew's four-and-a-half-year sentence for calling for release of the Panchen Lama, was released from jail in August disabled from the torture and ill-treatment she had suffered in detention.

#### **F4** 0-4 pts

**Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population?**

**0/4**

Ethnic Tibetans face a range of socioeconomic disadvantages and discriminatory treatment by employers, law enforcement agencies, and other official bodies. The dominant role of the Chinese language in education and employment limits opportunities for many Tibetans; Tibetans receive preferential treatment in university admission examinations, but this is often not enough to secure entrance. Tibetans who apply for all public sector jobs—including cleaners and other low-level staff—are now required to denounce the Dalai Lama, renounce their religious beliefs, and demonstrate their political loyalty in other ways that fundamentally negate their ethnic and cultural identity.

As in the rest of China, gender bias against women remains widespread, despite laws barring workplace discrimination. LGBT+ people suffer from discrimination, though same-sex sexual activity is not criminalized. Social pressures discourage discussion of LGBT+ issues.

# G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

**G1** 0-4 pts

**Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education?**

**0** / 4

The TAR has extreme restrictions on freedom of movement, particularly affecting ethnic Tibetans. Obstacles including troop deployments, checkpoints, roadblocks, required bureaucratic approvals, and passport restrictions impede freedom of movement within and beyond Tibetan areas, particularly for travel to and from the TAR. Chamdo city has been completely closed off to foreigners since 2008.

While Han Chinese tourists were encouraged to visit the TAR—particularly after the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions—and enjoy relative freedom of movement there, foreign tourists, journalists, diplomats, and others are tightly controlled and often denied entry. Foreign tourists must travel in groups with state-approved tour guides and obtain official permission to visit the TAR. Even then, last-minute travel bans are periodically imposed. Foreign nationals of Tibetan origin face enormous challenges in getting a visa, in some cases waiting for years only to be denied one.

Increased security efforts and Nepalese government cooperation have made it difficult for Tibetans to cross the border into Nepal. Obtaining a passport for foreign travel is extremely difficult for Tibetans, and in recent years some Tibetan pilgrims who have traveled abroad have faced detention upon return to China.

**G2** 0-4 pts

**Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors?**

**1** / 4

The economy is dominated by state-owned enterprises and private businesses with informal ties to officials. Tibetans reportedly find it more difficult than ethnic Chinese residents to obtain permits and loans to open businesses.

The multi-year policy of forcing Tibetans off the land and into the wage economy has given the state additional leverage over a growing proportion of Tibetans, as they lose their self-reliance and depend on the government for their income. The government has used this leverage to force Tibetans to give up their religious beliefs, to denounce the Dalai Lama, and in other ways to show political fealty to the CCP.

### **G3** 0-4 pts

<b>Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance?</b>	<b>1 / 4</b>
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China's restrictive family-planning policies are formally more lenient for Tibetans and other ethnic minorities. Officials limit urban Tibetans to two children and encourage rural Tibetans to stop at three. As a result, the TAR is one of the few areas of China without a skewed sex ratio. Nevertheless, the authorities continue to regulate reproduction, and related abuses are occasionally reported. State policies actively encourage interethnic marriages with financial and other incentives, and couples must designate a single ethnicity for their children. Separately, Tibetan women are vulnerable to human trafficking schemes that result in forced marriage.

### **G4** 0-4 pts

<b>Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation?</b>	<b>1 / 4</b>
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Exploitative employment practices are pervasive in many industries, as is the case across China, though ethnic Tibetans reportedly face additional disadvantages in hiring and compensation. Human trafficking that targets Tibetan women can lead to prostitution or exploitative employment in domestic service and other sectors elsewhere in China.

## On Tibet

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## Country Facts

Global Freedom Score

**1/100** Not Free

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2020

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