**John Torpey** 00:00

Hi, my name is John Torpey, and I'm Director of the Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Welcome to International Horizons, a podcast of the Ralph Bunche Institute that brings scholarly expertise to bear on our understanding of a wide range of international issues. Today we explore the timely topic of global trends in democracy and dictatorship with Michael J. Abramowitz, President of Freedom House, an organization that tracks democratic governance around the world. Before joining Freedom House in February 2017, Mr. Abramowitz was director of the U.S Holocaust Memorial Museum's Levine Institute for Holocaust Education. He led the Museum's genocide prevention efforts and later oversaw its public education program. He was previously national editor and then White House correspondent for The Washington Post. He's a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and former fellow at the German Marshall Fund and the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, a graduate of Harvard College and he's also a board member of the National Security Archive. Thank you so much for joining us today, Mike Abramowitz.

**Michael J. Abramowitz** 01:15

It's great to be here, John, thanks for having me.

**John Torpey** 01:18

Thanks so much for taking the time. So, your organization recently released a study of "Democracy Under Lockdown", was the title, that analyzes worldwide trends in freedom during the coronavirus pandemic. And it found that 80 countries were less free than when the pandemic began. Can you tell us more about the findings of the report?

**Michael J. Abramowitz** 01:40

Sure, if I may, John, I'd like to just say just one very quick word about Freedom House. Some of your listeners know, kind of, what we do. We really do two things; we document and analyze trends with respect to freedom and democracy, so our most important report is "Freedom in the World", which is a look at the state of democracy, the state of freedom in every country in the world. We do that every year. We do some other reports as well. We also support the work of human rights defenders and journalists who are working overseas often in authoritarian settings. So we're kind of an unusual combination of a maybe think tank and a do tank. And we are very strongly bipartisan. And over the years, we've had people from across the political aisle on our board and on our staff. So I just I just wanted to make put that as context.

**John Torpey** 02:36

Great. Thanks for that clarification.

**Michael J. Abramowitz** 02:38

Sure. And as you suggested, it's kind of interesting that our last "Freedom in the World" report came out just before, or just as, the pandemic was hitting globally, and at the time, the trends in democracy were not good, and we thought they were going to get even worse because of COVID-19. So we decided to do a special kind of mid-year report, looking at the health of global democracy from the perspective of the impact of the pandemic. The report was based on interviews that we conducted online from about 400 democracy and human rights experts. We did this survey in partnership with a survey firm called GQR, and we also combined that survey with our own research that we do from our global network of analysts, and so, this report covers a period from January to August 2020. And, as you say, the key findings of the report is that we found that the condition of democracy and human rights has grown worse in 80 countries. There was only one country where we saw it improve - that was Malawi, which had a free and fair election after having a previously fraudulent one. We saw the deterioration as particularly acute in struggling democracies and highly repressive states, and what was really concerning is that of the experts we surveyed, about 64% agreed that the impact of COVID-19 on democracy and human rights in their country of focus will be mostly negative over the next three to five years. We looked at five issues in particular as issues that are being affected by the pandemic: one is the transparency of government information on the pandemic; two is corruption; three is protection for vulnerable populations; and, fourth is government abuses of power. As a former journalist, I was particularly concerned about the fifth theme of the report, which is that there's been just a huge impact on the functioning of the independent news media. We found that at least 91 of 192 countries that we looked at have experienced restrictions on the news media, as part of the response to the outbreak. And this is making it quite difficult to disseminate vital information and really places both public health and freedom of expression at risk. You know, one silver lining, if you remember, John, 2019 was a year of mass protests in places like Hong Kong, Sudan, in many countries in the world, you saw a real demand for democracy and freedom that was bubbling up from the ground. One key finding of our report is that those mass protests have incredibly continued even under the lockdown situations. So we found that, although 158 countries had placed new restrictions on assembly and gatherings, significant protests had taken place in at least 90 countries, so the year of the protest is not over.

**John Torpey** 06:19

That's fascinating. I mean, it raises the question, at least for me, about what is exactly about a pandemic that contributes to the erosion of democracy? I mean, you might imagine that this is an occasion when leaders want to have their countries pulled together and are not interested in repressing them. But it doesn't seem to be the case. Why is that?

**Michael J. Abramowitz** 06:45

Right. Well, I think, any crisis that puts a strain on a system is going to be kind of a test of its strength. I think of what happened in the aftermath of 9/11, where within a year or two after 9/11, a lot of decisions were made by the government to restrict civil liberties, increase surveillance, you know, that really tested our democracy; kind of the same thing with economic crises, which often provide an opening for politicians, making false claims or bringing false hopes about what they're going to do. I think with COVID-19 people are scared, and they know that some restrictions are merited but most don't have the expertise to know exactly what [restrictions]. So that really left an opportunity for leaders who craved more power to take advantage of the moment and consolidate their rule. So we've seen that happening in our survey in countries ranging from Hungary, which had some emergency powers granted to the government there, Sri Lanka, where the authorities moved very deftly really to consolidate a more authoritarian kind of rule, and then China, of course, which is probably the strongest and most influential authoritarian power in the world right now.

**John Torpey** 08:13

Right. So, one of the most important recent scholarly analyses of these kinds of issues, namely Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt's "*How Democracies Die*" basically argues that democracies die gradually rather than all of a sudden, as they argue they used to do. Does your report bear out that kind of finding?

**Michael J. Abramowitz** 08:46

In a broad sense, yes. One point I would just make initially is that when we talk about backsliding or autocratization, which is a word scholars could use, there are different settings in which it occurs. So if say, Russia becomes more autocratic as it has in the last two decades, that's not a democracy dying because the system never democratized. It's still concerning, but it's for a different reason. So what we're really talking here is backsliding democracies; countries that had, relatively speaking, been on a path towards greater openness, greater democracy. We're talking about countries like Hungary, Poland, Turkey, Venezuela. I think one of the positive trends in recent years is that, relatively speaking, there have been fewer sharp breaks such as a military coups of the 60s or 70s, or communist revolutions. So in response directly to your question, declines in those kinds of countries we're talking about are happening more gradually in the kind of current wave of greater authoritarian behavior. So the stronger that the institutions that a country has the longer it takes. In a country like Hungary, where democratic institutions were relatively well established after the end of communism, the FIDESZ government has spent years, really almost 10 years, chipping away at the underpinnings of democracy, especially the media, the courts and the electoral framework. So after all, this enabled the party to win a supermajority in parliament; so the gradual declines that we had been seeing started to snowball. These [gradual declines] are happening through different means. So what you see in a number of these democratic settings is democracies retreating through putatively legal measures of constitutional reforms, judicial takeovers, pressure or co-optation of the owners of media outlets. This is the story of Poland and Hungary in the last decade, and to some extent, the earlier phase of autocratization in Turkey. The good news about all this is that there's more time to respond, there's more chance to push back because the process takes longer. I think the problem is that the changes are often more subtle, they're harder to identify, and less straightforward, and candidly, sometimes very hard to explain to average people. If you went to Hungary today, on the face of it, you would seem like, "Hey, what's the problem here?" But if you look at it, the authorities in Hungary have made it very, very hard to replace the leadership there through normal democratic means. So that's a problem. So you really have to be very vigilant and very direct about confronting encroachments on rights and on independent institutions.

**John Torpey** 11:53

Right. A couple of things you've said lead me to wonder about the role of institutions and traditions in history in addressing these issues. That is, I think about the example of China that you've raised, and there was a discussion that hasn't been going on now for a number of years, but for a time people thought that China was opening up its markets and its economy, and it was going towards a kind of market framework, and that that would kind of almost inevitably lead to democratization. That does not seem to have turned out to be the case, certainly not so far. So I wonder, if you look at China's long history, it's not one particularly of democratic rule. When people compare it to what's going on in our own country at the moment, people often speak about the long tradition of democracy that we can look back on in the United States. So could you talk a little bit about how you see the role of history and tradition in kind of determining these outcomes of dictatorship and democracy?

**Michael J. Abramowitz** 13:09

You know, it's a great question. And there's no simple answer here. Directly with respect to China, I think China really presents a very profound challenge to those of us who care about freedom, who care about democracy. As you mentioned, I think China, since kind of the opening up of the country, starting in the 1970s, has done an incredible job lifting hundreds of millions of people out of poverty, the country is much better governed than it was before, and while it didn't have the trappings of liberal democracy or the reality of liberal democracy that many of us would prefer to see, it was moving in a generally opening kind of direction. And that obviously stops with the arrival of Xi Jinping, who has really taken China in a much more illiberal direction, imposing the great China firewall, which has prevented much outside information from getting to the Chinese people, much more restrictions on people's liberties and freedoms. It's interesting that China, starting from a relatively low base has done even worse than our scores and Freedom House over the last 10 years. Particularly with respect to internet freedom, [China] is, I think, the least well performing country with respect to respecting internet rights and user rights of any country in the world, according to our most recent survey, "Freedom of The Net." However, China has obviously done a very good job economically, and it really is now kind of holding itself out as a model to the developing world and to dictators in the developing world as a place where you can get - kind of have your cake and eat it too - that you can have economic liberalization, coupled with political control and repression. And that's a very powerful story that we need to combat. I think in the long term, I firmly believe that freedom of thought and openness leads itself to better outcomes for society, and I also think that China may be more brittle on the inside than the current outside image shows, but nonetheless, it's a very powerful and concerning signal to those of us who love freedom and democracy.

**John Torpey** 16:12

Understood. So I wonder, a little bit closer to home, how would you assess the significance of the relative distancing of the Trump administration from the United States', at least in the post war period, traditional orientation to human rights and certain kinds of alliances. And what kind of difference does that make in the index that you all come up with at Freedom House about the trends in democracy?

**Michael J. Abramowitz** 16:51

Well, the first thing that I would always start off by saying is that we still have a very robust democracy. And I think any suggestion to the contrary is wrong. We've had concerns for some time about the health of U.S democracy, and candidly, those concerns predated President Trump. But on a global scale, the United States still does very well. Now, that said, I think anyone who cares about democracy would be concerned about recent trends. Just a specific data point: over the last 10 years or so, our democracy scores in the United States have declined by about eight points on 100 point scale; so going from 94 to 86. And there have been a lot of further troubling signs during 2019 and 2020 that would be things that we would be concerned about, so there's new evidence of electoral interference, escalating clashes between the executive branch and the Congress, defiance of congressional authority. I mean, a big issue in the United States is also still the continuing problems in our justice system with respect to equal rights for all communities. So I definitely think U.S democracy is under pressure. And I think, from Freedom House's perspective, what I would particularly point out, too, is that the United States has traditionally been for better or for worse the leader of the "free world." While the United States itself has been an imperfect tribune for democracy at times, and has made very serious mistakes, and I'm think of things like the Vietnam War, the Iraq War. I still think that, at our best, we are an indispensable force for human rights and democracy in the world, and that other countries do look to us for leadership and inspiration on this. It's not a surprise that the protesters in Hong Kong, when they hit the streets last summer, were waving American flags and singing the Star Spangled Banner. So I think that's important for people in United States to remember that we are an inspiration and an example to the rest of the world and they're watching closely. And so I do think that, to the extent that President Trump has kind of departed from that kind of modeling approach, to the extent that he has embraced dictators, the extent that he has, I would say, instrumentalized human rights so that we only are concerned about the human rights of countries that we oppose from a kind of national security point of view, like Venezuela or Iran and look the other way with respect to the human rights violations in places like Saudi Arabia or Hungary, to name two American allies, and that's of concern. It's always been that we've applied things imperfectly, but I think the gap between our aspirations and our ideals and the reality has really widened, I think, over the last four years.

**John Torpey** 20:40

I guess I want to push you on this a little bit. I wonder, to what extent is the world that you and I are kind of talking about, the post World War Two world of international alliances and the notion of the United States as the kind of leader of the free world, I mean, the pandemic seems to have created or revealed the fissures of a world that isn't like that anymore. I mean, it used to be the case that, in a situation like this, everybody would look to the United States to marshal the best experts and to mount a response. That clearly is not the case. Angela Merkel in Germany has said, essentially that we have to figure out our own way forward. I mean, I guess the question in a sense is, even if Trump is not reelected and Biden is, can that world be put back together again? Or has it kind of fractured irremediably?

**Michael J. Abramowitz** 21:51

I think that's a great point, John, and I think that the world is a lot different than it was 20 or 30 years ago, even if Vice President Biden is elected president he will have a hard time. But I do think, with respect, that people do look to the United States for leadership, and I think it's quite striking that a normal president would have been really trying to mobilize collective world action around COVID-19. The reason that the German Chancellor is doing it is because there's an absence of U.S leadership. By the way, this is not just a partisan thing; I think that when President Obama was president he kind of did not want to get involved in the Syria conflict, and really studiously kind of stayed out of it. Now, one can have an argument, and a discussion on whether or not that was a good idea, but when the U.S. retreated, you saw Russia step into the breach and really help push that conflict in into a direction that I think was really against our interests, of the United States. So I do think that it's harder, the world has changed. There's no question about it. But I still think with enlightened U.S. leadership, with paying more attention to our allies, that we can be moving in a better direction than we are right now.

**John Torpey** 23:37

Got it. So I guess now it's unavoidable to ask you a little bit about the election that is just around the corner, because it does have such enormous consequences for the world. I mean, the whole world, is in a certain sense watching to see what happens in our election and watching, I think, widely with considerable concern about where we're going. I guess I wonder, and I don't want to ask you to prognosticate and predict the outcome, but I guess maybe you could talk a little bit about how you see a scenario going forward of where we'll go whoever wins the election?

**Michael J. Abramowitz** 24:25

Sure. Well, first of all, anyone who lived through 2016, who can state that they know what's going to happen on November 3, is crazy. So I do think the polls are suggesting one thing, but I think we just have to be honest that we don't know and obviously what really matters is what happens in six to ten states that are still very close, so you haven't asked me to predict, so I'm going to take you up on the offer not to predict. A second point I would make is that, I do think that the election has laid bare some of the ongoing systemic problems in American democracy. We have huge problems with campaign finance and the way that large private and foreign financial interests can influence politicians and campaigns. As we're seeing now, we have an archaic and problematic election system as we're seeing now that disenfranchises people all over the country and makes it much, much harder to vote than it should be. And of course, we have this intense polarization, which has gotten so bad that it's now a matter of the culture war whether you should wear a mask or not, or whether we should listen to epidemiologists. So I think the election has laid bare the extent problems in U.S democracy. How things play out after the election? It's hard to say, I really do think that it's a very sharp break between the two candidates and how they would approach things, and I think you've seen that in the debates. And so I think that we will see things go in different directions, depending on on who wins. I do think a lot about the whole issue of polarization, and, when you look at polls, there's a lot of agreement between peoples on things that they're concerned about, whether it's health care, the economic issues, in some respects. I sometimes think there's more agreement than the divisions that people recognize, but we're in a system where it's very hard for politicians to try to work together to solve these problems. And I remain hopeful that will change after the election, but I'm somewhat skeptical.

**John Torpey** 27:11

Right. It's understandable under the circumstances. I guess, in a way, it all raises for me this question about the idea of American exceptionalism, which is often, I think, abused as a kind of Shibboleth about the United States and its kind of grand historical role in human history and that sort of thing. But it does seem as though this election has revealed in certain ways that we're not maybe quite so exceptional, and that we're not really unique as is often said, and this comes around to issues of the kind that you and Freedom House address with regard to things like human rights, and you've mentioned this with regard to our shortcomings in the area of racial justice. I wonder whether you see this as having that kind of consequence that the United States will be seen less as this kind of unique kind of beacon in the world and more like a kind of, in some ways, ordinary country that has a relatively uniquely robust, or at least uniquely long lived democratic system, but maybe isn't quite so released from the laws of gravity.

**Michael J. Abramowitz** 28:39

I thought about this question a lot, John, and I appreciate you raising it. And I think it's hard to work in a place like Freedom House without really seeing the United States as part of a global story, right? So that the problems that we have had in the United States are not unique to the United States. Just to take a few: gerrymandering - that's a global issue, it's not just a problem that has hampered U.S democracy. Court packing, trying to influence and control the court system, this is a global issue, as we're seeing in a place like Poland, for instance. Attacks on fake news, or allegedly fake news, as kind of a pretext to kind of take steps against the independent media. That's a global problem as our survey on the pandemic showed. I think it's still fair to say that we are one of the oldest democracies on the planet, I guess maybe the oldest. And we have strong institutions that have helped bolster our defense against some of these trends. And I certainly think that, among the strong institutions, the United States has still a very vibrant and free press. We still have a strong court system. But, you know, these institutions are under a great deal of pressure, and I think it's really important for Americans not to take it for granted that these institutions will always be strong. Just to circle back to the point I made in response to your last question, one can have a debate about American exceptionalism, and I do think there's some arguments on both sides, but I do think that the United States does have a special role to play in the protection of human rights and democracy, and that when the United States does not play that role, human rights and democracy suffers in the world.

**John Torpey** 31:18

Got it. Thank you very much. I guess we're going to see in the near future, in the very near future, how this is all going to play out. But for now, I say that's it for today's episode of International Horizons. I want to thank Mike Abramowitz of Freedom House for sharing his insights about recent trends in democracy around the world and in the United States itself. I also want to thank Hristo Voynov for his technical assistance. This is John Torpey, saying thanks for joining us, and we look forward to having you with us again for the next episode of International Horizons.