



Venezuelan opposition supporters gather to listen to the head of Venezuela's National Assembly and the country's self-proclaimed acting president, Juan Guaidó, during a rally in Caracas on January 26.

PHOTO: FEDERICO PARRA/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

# How democracy backslides

ALI RIAZ

We are living in a time which can no longer be described as a democratic era. Almost 61 percent of the global population now live under systems which are either 'not free' or 'partly free' according to Freedom House, a Washington-based organisation which tracks the state of democracy around the world. The Freedom of the World Report 2019, published early this year, documented that only 39 percent of the global population are living under systems which can be described as 'free.' These designations are based on the extent and quality of civil and political rights enjoyed by citizens. Similar figures have been presented by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU). Based on a four-fold typology of existing systems of governance—full democracies, flawed democracies, hybrid regimes and authoritarian regimes—the EIU account shows 47.7 percent of the global population were in countries in full and flawed democracies in 2018. Of the remainder, almost 36 percent are in authoritarian systems.

This state of democracy hasn't emerged in a year; there was no single spectacular event which can be marked as the turning point, instead this has developed over a period of more than a decade and a half. The world has witnessed the gradual, at



Barbed wire is seen laid on a deserted road during restrictions in Srinagar, August 5, 2019.

PHOTO: REUTERS/DANISH ISMAIL

times precipitous, decline of democracy during this period. Country after country, in various continents, has capitulated to the authoritarian temptation. The reversal of the gains made since 1974 began in the early 2000s but became a clear pattern and went into a downward spiral since 2005. Since then, the number of democratic countries has decreased significantly, and

consequently the number of undemocratic states has risen. Equally important is the emergence of countries which stand between the two extremes—described by Freedom House as 'Partly Free' and the EIU as 'hybrid regimes'—regimes which combine both democratic and authoritarian traits, for example, frequent and direct elections, and high levels of political repression and exclusion. The number of these in 2018 were 29, with 16.7 percent of the global population.

The process of this reversal of the spread of democracy, also described as democratic backsliding or democratic erosion or de-democratisation, has reached its consecutive 13th year in 2018. It is not surprising that the wave of democratisation has experienced backsliding. It has happened before. Samuel Huntington's *Wave Theories* showed that after the first long wave between 1828 and 1926, there was a reverse wave which lasted for 20 years (1922-1942); the second wave of democratisation (1943-1962) was followed by the second reverse wave of 17 years (1958-1975). The much cherished and celebrated third wave began in 1975 and continued at least until the early 2000s. But, by 2005, signs became palpable that the situation has changed.

There are some distinct features of this round of backsliding—the third reverse wave. Firstly, the process has affected the countries which were the most vulnerable—the countries which began the journey towards democratisation after 1988. According to Freedom House, "of the 23 countries that suffered a negative status change over the past 13 years (moving from Free to Partly Free, or Partly Free to Not Free), almost two-thirds (61 percent) had earned a positive status change after 1988." The interruption of transition, either as stagnation or

outright reversal, has happened in at least 32 instances between 2000 and 2014, according to available data and analyses. Except for the time of the beginning of the democratisation process, there is very little common to these countries located in various continents and at various stages of development.

Continued to page 6