



Updated December 2, 2025

Global Human Rights: The Department of State's Country Reports on Human Rights Practices

Introduction

The State Department's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* are an annual U.S. government account of human rights conditions in countries around the globe. The reports characterize countries on the basis of their adherence to "internationally recognized human rights," which has been understood to refer to civil, political, and worker rights set forth in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and other international human rights agreements.

By law, the human rights reports are to be issued by February 25 each year, but in practice the issuance has often been delayed until March or April. The State Department released the most recent reports, covering calendar year 2024, on August 12, 2025. The reports provide individual narratives on countries and territories worldwide. As with prior reports, the 2024 reports do not compare countries or rank them based on the severity of human rights abuses documented.

Legislative Foundation and Evolution

The foundational statutory requirement for the human rights reports is found in Sections 116 and 502B of the Foreign Assistance Act (FAA) of 1961 (P.L. 87-195), as amended. Both of these provisions were first enacted via congressional amendments in the mid-1970s and have been broadened and strengthened over time through additional amendments.

The 1970s was a formative period for human rights-related legislation as Congress sought to enshrine human rights as a priority in U.S. foreign policy. Section 502B of the FAA (22 U.S.C. §2304), added in 1974 and substantially strengthened in 1976, sought to withhold U.S. security assistance from countries the governments of which engage in "a consistent pattern of gross violations of internationally recognized human rights." Section 116 (22 U.S.C. §2151n), added in 1975 and also strengthened in the years following, imposed a similar restriction for recipients of U.S. development assistance. Contained within these provisions was language requiring that the Secretary of State transmit to Congress each year a report on the human rights conditions of recipient countries; an amendment to Section 116 in 1979 broadened the reporting requirement to cover all other foreign countries that are members of the United Nations. This language thus serves as the legislative basis for the State Department's annual human rights reports.

In the early reports, there was concern within the State Department about publicly characterizing the human rights conditions in other countries, particularly U.S. allies. The first reports were criticized for lacking objectivity and being thin on substance. Over time, with improvements in the breadth, quality, and accuracy of the reports, many observers came to recognize them as more authoritative.

Evolving Scope. Section 116 and Section 502B of the FAA, as amended, broadly require "a full and complete report" regarding the status of "internationally recognized human rights" in foreign countries and gross violations of such rights (e.g., torture and arbitrary detention). The reports have also served to help fulfill a separate statutory requirement to report annually on the status of "internationally recognized worker rights" in certain countries (see 19 U.S.C. §2464).

Through gradual amendments to Sections 116 and 502B over the years, Congress has specifically mandated coverage of certain topics, such as coercion in population control, protection of refugees, acts of antisemitism, and press freedom. Most recently, in December 2023, Congress amended Section 116 to require reporting on transnational repression issues, where applicable (see §6707 of P.L. 118-31; 22 U.S.C. §2151n(d)(13)). The reports also reference separate congressionally mandated reports on international religious freedom (IRF) and trafficking in persons (TIP).

The State Department has generally broadened the scope of the reports to add or expand coverage of certain topics over time, sometimes due to executive branch initiative and other times in response to amendments to the statutory requirements or other congressional directives. The most recent reports, covering 2024, contrast with this general trend and feature "streamlined" topical coverage (see "Trump Administration Changes" below).

Drafting Process

The State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL) has traditionally coordinated the drafting and issuance of the human rights reports. Embassy officers use reporting guidance, issued annually by DRL, to formulate initial drafts for each country. The reports are then edited by DRL staff and further refined in consultation with other relevant State Department offices and the embassies. The Department of Labor may also contribute to portions concerning worker rights. Information sources for the reports are wide-ranging and may include information gathered by U.S. embassies and consulates, foreign government officials, nongovernmental and international organizations, human rights defenders, and others.

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) has previously noted that preparing the reports "involves a significant commitment of State time and resources and results in a lengthy product." In an October 2018 report, the State Department Office of Inspector General (OIG) found that DRL had "established generally effective processes" for report production.

The Trump Administration in early 2025 initiated a broad reorganization of the State Department in order to,

according to Secretary of State Marco Rubio, consolidate region-specific functions, remove “redundant offices,” and eliminate “non-statutory programs that are misaligned with America’s core national interests.” The reorganization entailed the closure of most DRL offices, including most DRL regional offices composed of officers focused on human rights issues in particular countries. Some observers argued that such changes risked undermining the quality of the annual human rights reports.

Trump Administration Changes

According to the State Department, the human rights reports covering 2024, released in August 2025, were “streamlined for better utility and accessibility ... and to be more responsive to the underlying legislative mandate and aligned to the administration’s executive orders.” The 2024 reports do not contain dedicated discussions of several human rights that are set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and that have traditionally been included in the reports despite not being explicitly required by statute. These include fair trial rights; privacy rights; freedom of assembly and association (beyond worker rights); freedom of movement; and the right to participate in public affairs and elections, among others.

In the wake of the release of the 2024 reports, some media reports highlighted criticisms that the scope and content of the reports was shaped to reflect the Trump Administration’s political and foreign policy preferences in a way that undermined the traditional objectivity and authoritativeness of the reports. Some human rights organizations objected to the reports on various grounds, including by arguing that some countries received markedly different assessments of their human rights practices than they received in prior years as a consequence of their government’s relations with the Trump Administration. A State Department spokesperson publicly defended the 2024 reports while declining to discuss country-specific details.

Selected Congressional Responses. In late October 2025, several Members of Congress wrote to Secretary of State Rubio to express “deep concern regarding the integrity” of the reports, and to request information about how they were prepared. Some Members argued that the Administration’s approach may fail to adhere to the broad statutory requirement for a “full and complete report” on the status of “internationally recognized human rights.” Some other Members applauded the readability of the 2024 reports. S. 2611, introduced in July 2025 amid press coverage indicating that the Administration intended to scale back the scope of the reports, would amend the statutory requirements to mandate coverage of some human rights issues that are not explicitly statutorily required.

Reported Plans for the 2025 Reports. In November 2025, the State Department reportedly issued internal instructions for preparing the 2025 human rights reports that included requirements that U.S. diplomatic missions report on several topics of concern to the Trump Administration, including diversity, equity and inclusion policies; the prevalence of abortion; gender-transition surgery among children; and other issues. The reported instructions drew sharp criticism from some human rights organizations. The

planned inclusion of new, nonstatutory topics would seemingly diverge from the 2024 reports’ focus on topics that are explicitly statutorily required; it is unclear from public reporting if the Administration intends also to restore discussion of any of the nonstatutorily identified human rights that were included prior to the 2024 reports.

Relationship to U.S. Foreign Policy

The content of the human rights reports and the role they should serve, as well as the role of human rights in U.S. foreign policy more broadly, have been contested since the reports began in the 1970s. Congress has been a key actor in these debates, at times as a source of pressure on the executive branch to place greater emphasis on human rights when formulating foreign policy.

The reports help inform U.S. policy vis-a-vis individual countries around the world, and may help incentivize improvements in human rights practices given that most nations may seek to avoid being identified as a human rights-violating nation by the U.S. government. The reports have infrequently been used to restrict U.S. assistance in accordance with Section 116 or Section 502B of the FAA, and some human rights advocates have argued that the executive branch has historically insufficiently adhered to these assistance prohibitions. The FAA does not require to be made public a list of governments that are or have been subject to restrictions pursuant to these FAA provisions, and the State Department has not characterized in reports to date which, if any, governments have met the aforementioned statutory standard of “a consistent pattern of gross violations of internationally human rights.” This differs somewhat from other similar annual reports that Congress mandated in later years, such as those on IRF and TIP, which require the public designation of problematic governments for potential sanctions.

As a general matter, some analysts argue that tying U.S. policy too closely to human rights can overly constrain the U.S. government’s flexibility to address other challenges affecting U.S. interests. Supporters of robust human rights and democracy promotion conversely argue that doing so serves U.S. interests over the long term, noting, for example, that threats to U.S. security tend to be associated with countries with poor human rights records and authoritarian governance (in addition to their arguments for doing so on moral grounds).

The precise meaning and scope of some human rights, and which human rights (if any) should be emphasized as part of U.S. foreign policy, have also been contested, with such debates shaped in part by U.S. policymakers’ differing political and ideological inclinations.

See also CRS Report R47890, *Democracy and Human Rights in U.S. Foreign Policy: Tools and Considerations for Congress*.

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IF10795

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