



Finding success in hard places:

How assistance to democracy champions
can turn the tide even in backsliding
and authoritarian countries

Fernanda Buriel, Nate Grubman, and Patrick Quirk



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Nicaraguans exiled in Costa Rica protest outside the Nicaraguan Embassy ahead of President Daniel Ortega's swearing-in ceremony after being re-elected for a fourth consecutive term, in San Jose, Costa Rica January 10, 2022. Source: Reuters/Mayela Lopez

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FINDING SUCCESS IN HARD PLACES:

How assistance to democracy champions can turn the tide even in backsliding and authoritarian countries

By Fernanda Buriel, Nate Grubman, and Patrick Quirk

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I. Introduction and overview

Freedom and democracy are in decline globally, according to the Atlantic Council's Freedom Index¹. Political freedom in particular has slumped sharply since 2019, bringing the world to a twenty-four-year low. The biggest backsliders—the places with the sharpest declines in political freedom—span every major geographic region and many are particularly relevant to US national security.

There are several fundamental reasons for the United States to support strategies that aim to halt such backsliding and foster democratization, including ones that go beyond the moral obligation to support humanitarian values. For instance, reversing the tide of democratic backsliding can make the United States safer. Democracies are less likely to go to war with one another and less prone to enable and export transnational crime or terrorism.² The latest research also suggests that democracies foster more economic growth than do autocracies.³ Democracies are better at adapting to adverse economic events and avoiding large-scale disasters, such as famines.⁴ Democracies also are more reliable trading partners for the United States: They offer better business opportunities by upholding the rule of law and protecting investments from the arbitrary predation of political elites. By offering overall better quality of life to citizens, democracies are less likely to push them to flee through irregular migration. The vast majority of people around the world continue to prefer to be governed democratically.⁵

Democracy support also strengthens the US position more broadly in the strategic contest against the autocratic rivals

of China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea. These authoritarian, revisionist, and expansionist countries know that they can more easily advance their interests when dealing with weak democracies or autocracies. Robust democratic institutions—transparent judiciaries, capable legislatures, responsive political parties, an active civil society, and a free press—make it harder for the rulers in the autocratic bloc to co-opt elites in other countries and advance their malign agendas. It is easier for Beijing to broker deals for Chinese military bases and port access, for instance, in places devoid of a free press or effective political opposition (e.g., Djibouti, Cambodia, and Equatorial Guinea). This explains why China is exporting autocratic governance practices, surveillance technology, and other tools to create a world safe for autocracy.⁶

But even if the United States wants a more democratic world, can it effectively pursue one? Is the “global democratic recession” evidence that supporting democracy is a losing battle and that US policymakers should just retreat?⁷ Our experience indicates that, despite the bleak recent data on global democratic progress, democracy assistance is still crucial, not only in countries undergoing political openings and democratic consolidation but also—and perhaps even more so—in backsliding contexts.

We argue that using foreign assistance (in addition to and in concert with diplomacy and investment) to support democracy champions wherever they are is an effective strategy, even if the payoff is not immediately apparent at the level of a country's political system.

1 Atlantic Council. “Freedom and Prosperity Indexes.” <https://freedom-and-prosperity-indexes.atlanticcouncil.org/>

2 Nazifa Alizada et al., *Case for Democracy: Conference Report*, V-Dem Institute, University of Gothenburg, January 2022, https://www.v-dem.net/static/website/files/vdem_casefordemocracy_report.pdf.

3 Daron Acemoglu et al., “Democracy Does Cause Growth,” *Journal of Political Economy* 127, no. 1 (2019): 1-26, <https://economics.mit.edu/sites/default/files/publications/Democracy%20Does%20Cause%20Growth.pdf>.

4 Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

5 R. S. Deese, “Global Poll: 84% Believe It Is Important to Have Democracy,” *Democracy without Borders*, June 1, 2023, <https://www.democracywithoutborders.org/27849/global-poll-84-believe-it-is-important-to-have-democracy/>.

6 “China's Malign Global Influence: Regional Snapshots,” House Foreign Affairs Committee, n.d., <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/chinas-malign-global-influence-regional-snapshots/>; Benjamin Weber, “The Global Expansion of PRC Surveillance Technology,” International Republican Institute, July 10, 2024, <https://www.iri.org/resources/the-global-expansion-of-prc-surveillance-technology/>; and Caitlin Dearing Scott et al., “Bolstering Democratic Resilience to PRC Foreign Authoritarian Influence,” International Republican Institute, August 8, 2024, <https://www.iri.org/resources/bolstering-democratic-resilience-to-prc-foreign-authoritarian-influence/>.

7 Larry Diamond, “Facing Up to the Democratic Recession,” *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 1 (2015): 141-155, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/facing-up-to-the-democratic-recession/>.

II. The proven impact of democracy and governance assistance

The process by which aspiring autocrats subvert democracy resembles a soccer game in which they tilt the playing field by capturing the institutions key to ensuring a fair match, manipulating the crowd through divisive rhetoric and propaganda, taking out opponents both with dirty tactics and dubious application of the rules, and rewriting the rule book itself. Increasingly, autocrats are not only using these methods to tilt the fields on which they play but are also supporting efforts to do so beyond their borders.

Democracy assistance—the foreign assistance countries such as the United States provide to protect and strengthen democratic governance abroad—is an effective nonkinetic (soft power) tool the United States can use to keep these fields level and fair. It strengthens the capacity of democratic institutions and actors within and outside government, complementing diplomatic efforts to promote democracy and hold authorities accountable.

There is extensive research supporting the efficacy of democracy assistance in many of these domains. The latest and most systematic cross-national quantitative research shows that democracy assistance correlates with improvements in the quality of democracy in its recipient countries.⁸ In particular, democracy assistance is critical to preserving elections as

institutions of representation, pluralism, and accountability. Randomized control trials have shown international and citizen efforts to observe and verify electoral processes to be effective in achieving their goals. Cross-national research shows that in countries that have received higher levels of democracy assistance, voters are better able to reward incumbents who generate economic growth and punish those who do not.⁹ Recent research also shows that incumbents who try to circumvent constitutional term limits are less likely to succeed in countries that have received higher levels of democracy support.¹⁰ External aid is thus critical to ensuring that, come election time, people are equipped and have the means to hold their leaders accountable for their performance.

Extant research also supports the notion that democracy assistance can be important in strengthening the social fabric and building societal resilience against polarization and corrosion of the public sphere.¹¹ Civic education programs have been shown to be effective in increasing enthusiasm for democratic processes and improving the quality of information available to citizens.¹² Structured public deliberations, such as a set of candidate debates coinciding with the 2021 elections in Honduras, have been consistently shown to reduce polarization.¹³

8 Rachel M. Gisselquist, Miguel Niño-Zarazúa, and Melissa Samarin, “Does Aid Support Democracy? A Systematic Review of the Literature,” *WIDER Working Paper* 2021/14 (Helsinki: United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.35188/UNU-WIDER/2021/948-8>.

9 Susan D. Hyde, “The Future of Political Development,” *Perspectives on Politics* 8, no. 2 (2010): 511-527, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592710001222>; and Tobias Heinrich and Matt W. Loftis, “Democracy Aid and Electoral Accountability,” *International Political Science Review* 63, no. 1 (2022), first published online August 30, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002717723962>.

10 Julia Leininger and Daniel Nowack, “Protection against Autocratisation: How International Democracy Promotion Helped Preserve Presidential Term Limits in Malawi and Senegal,” *Third World Quarterly* 43, no. 2 (2022): 309–31, doi:10.1080/01436597.2021.2000855.

11 National Democratic Institute, *Evaluation Brief: Randomized Control Trial in Honduras*, September 2023, <https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI-EvalBrief-HONDURAS%20RCT%20FINAL.pdf>.

12 Eric Mvukiyehe and Cyrus Samii, “Promoting Democracy in Fragile States: Field Experimental Evidence from Liberia,” *World Development* 95 (2017): 254-267, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2017.02.014>.

13 National Democratic Institute, *Evaluation Brief*.

III. How democracy assistance helps in backsliding cases

When looking at the trends in Freedom Index scores for Lebanon, Nicaragua, or the countries of the Sahel, for instance, one might think that democratic support and efforts in these countries are failing. But what these macro-level indicators cannot easily capture are the effects of democracy assistance in maintaining civic action in repressive environments and equipping democracy champions to fight against authoritarianism and seizing opportunities for change when they arise.

A perhaps obvious but useful insight is that backsliding countries are never monoliths—different institutions and sectors within these countries display different levels of commitment to democracy and capacity to make necessary changes toward more free and fair societies. For example, research has highlighted the roles opposition political parties can play in the disruption of democratic backsliding—by forming electoral coalitions to stymie the reelection of autocratic incumbents, foiling antidemocratic legislation, working to expose corruption, and so on.¹⁴ Aid can and should adapt accordingly, leveraging political will where it exists and strengthening the capacity of willing actors to implement or demand reforms and impose constraints on power. Georgia, Lebanon, and Nigeria have highlighted opportunities for democracy assistance to support social movements in channeling citizen support for responsive policies and improving democratic accountability. Moreover, research on democracy assistance programs suggest that targeted interventions can help large, diverse reform coalitions overcome collective action dilemmas by helping foster coordination mechanisms and shared decision-making processes.¹⁵

While it is much easier to invest in established institutions that have the government's support and collaboration, it is often the case that democracy champions in independent public institutions, opposition parties, or civil society are fighting on

their own—and against the central government. Particularly in contexts where autocratic forces are gaining ground and political power, and where supposedly independent institutions are co-opted by antidemocratic leaders, international support can be people's only lifeline.

In the brief cases discussed below, we explore some positive roles and results of democracy assistance in countries that have recently bounced back from backsliding, as well as those that are still mired in it. They illustrate how aid can help level playing fields for fair and plural political competition, enhance accountability mechanisms, and bolster the participation of historically marginalized groups.

Building resilient democracies and combating backsliding require work to ensure that elections and other institutions remain fair and enable pluralism and popular accountability. The work also requires strategies to safeguard a healthy information environment, foster opportunities for citizen collaboration, and reduce the risks of deleterious polarization that inhibits compromises. Building resilient democracy requires concerted efforts to bolster transparency and the rule of law, facilitating good governance that meets citizens expectations. Finally, building resilient democracy requires a commitment to citizen participation, equity, and the inclusion of historically marginalized groups, so that democracy offers opportunity for all segments of diverse societies to meaningfully influence policy.

International assistance can help civil society groups and activists survive and maintain what is left of civic space in their countries, standing ready to rebuild when windows of opportunity open. This requires a high degree of pragmatism. Research has highlighted that democratic assistance in restrictive political environments must be tailored to the operating context, the character of the political system, and the relative strength of autocratic actors vis-à-vis their opposition.¹⁶

14 International Republican Institute, *Evidence Briefer: Political Parties and Opposition to Democratic Erosion*, April 23, 2024, <https://www.iri.org/resources/evidence-briefer-political-parties-and-opposition-to-democratic-erosion/>.

15 International Republican Institute, *Evidence Briefer: Supporting Effective and Sustainable Networks and Mentorships*, June 5, 2023, <https://www.iri.org/resources/evidence-briefer-supporting-effective-and-sustainable-networks-and-mentorships/>.

16 Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening, *Political Parties in Closing Space: A Technical Leadership Briefing*, n.d., <https://cepps.org/technical-leadership/gept-political-parties-in-closing-space/>.

IV. Case analyses: Success in success and success in failure

Because the scope of democracy and governance assistance is so wide and the means through which it impacts individuals and institutions are so different in diverse political scenarios, statistical analyses can only go so far. It is important to identify the role of interventions in country success cases, but it is also crucial to recognize that assistance programs can and do make a positive impact in countries that are not exactly bright spots for democracy at large. This section demonstrates how democracy assistance contributed to improvements in countries that have recently turned the tide against backsliding and has helped forestall further closing in countries experiencing backsliding.

Democratizing countries

In a number of countries, including Armenia, Guatemala, Honduras, and Zambia, sustained democracy support has been critical to facilitating and leveraging the openings that have allowed for the expansion of freedoms. Just as sustained international engagement was critical to reversing backsliding, it will also be critical to protecting and building upon recent gains.

Armenia

In a country that has hardly been governed democratically since its independence, many Armenians harbored high expectations for what democracy could do for them, particularly after the consequential mass antigovernment protests and elections in 2018 that led to a political transition. Democracy assistance has been critical to strengthening the ability of the government, legislature, political parties, and civil society institutions to respond to citizens' needs and offer channels of participation and mechanisms of accountability to make democracy meaningful to citizens.

In a country where elections had been marred by accusations of fraud since its independence, democracy assistance has been critical to improving the legal framework and administration of elections. Democracy assistance has also focused on offering civic education to groups traditionally marginalized by Armenia's political system, including young people and

people with disabilities. International support has been critical to helping the government and legislature in collecting the data it needs to build evidence-based policy. It has also been critical to fostering a public sphere in which Armenians can access quality information and engage with their representatives, including through the organization of virtual townhall meetings. A volatile regional security environment—including a second Nagorno-Karabakh war that erupted in 2020, increased border tension since 2021, and, to some extent, the Russian aggression in Ukraine—has been detrimental to the Armenian democratic reform agenda. The Atlantic Council observes a small decline in the country's Freedom Index score during this time. Sustained support will be important to the struggle to make sure that one of the world's most successful recent democratic transitions delivers on citizens' expectations.

Guatemala

Between 2020 and 2022, Guatemala experienced the eleventh-largest decline in freedom in the world, according to the Freedom Index. In 2019, President Jimmy Morales ordered that the mandate of the UN-backed International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala not be renewed, which was followed by a deterioration in the rule of law and heightened repression against protesters, journalists, and activists.¹⁷ But the country's deterioration in freedoms may be turning around. In 2023, Bernardo Arévalo, promising a democratic spring, achieved an unexpected victory in the presidential elections. When the country's attorney general tried to bar him from taking office, mass protests, the firmness of the Supreme Electoral Court in valiantly upholding the election results, and international pressure were critical to allowing the elected president to take office. The ability of Guatemalans to peacefully choose a new leader may be a product of long-term investment in citizen observation, electoral process and results verification for transparency, and technical assistance for the electoral commission. The 2023 electoral process also highlighted the importance of strengthening the participation of a new generation of leaders, especially community leaders and indigenous groups, in the electoral processes. Achieving greater accountability, pluralism, and the rule of law will require more than elections. International support will be

¹⁷ Tiziano Breda, "Curtain Falls on Guatemala's International Commission against Impunity," International Crisis Group, September 3, 2019, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/central-america/guatemala/curtain-falls-guatemalas-international-commission-against-impunity>.

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critical to strengthening the efforts of domestic advocates and policymakers interested in fashioning socioeconomic and transparency-related reforms.

Honduras

Honduras appears among the countries with the largest improvements in freedom scores between 2018 and 2023, which is an amazing accomplishment considering the political chaos it experienced after a messy presidential election in 2017. Back then, the Honduran election commission failed to announce results in a timely manner, then one of its commissioners stated that opposition candidate Salvador Nasralla's lead was "irreversible," just before official results showed reelection of sitting president Juan Orlando Hernández.¹⁸ Street celebrations quickly turned into violent protests, to which the government responded violently.¹⁹ But since 2021, Honduras has achieved the third-greatest expansion in the Freedom Index of any country in the world. In 2021, despite the added challenge of a global pandemic, Honduras's presidential elections went much more smoothly. Democracy assistance contributed to the procurement of a reliable results transmission system and the training of election officials on critical issues, like electoral dispute resolution, to better address grievances. Election observers, supported by international implementers, helped make the process more transparent and credible. External support also played a role in fostering collaborations between local governments and civil society groups to plan and implement initiatives to prevent violence and ensure citizen security. As the country prepares for new elections in 2025 amid high levels of political polarization, this type of support only becomes more important. Ongoing assistance to strengthen citizen interaction with different democratic processes and mechanisms is essential to ensure these gains have lasting impact. Honduras's continued democratic improvement and stability impact US interests in several areas, including the country's capacity to counter transnational crime and irregular migration. Continued attention is necessary to avoid shrinking civic space, infringing the right to a free press, and attacks on rule of law.

Zambia

According to the Atlantic Council Freedom Index, Zambia experienced the sixth-largest decline in freedom of any country in the world between 2012 and 2016. During this time, former President Edgar Lungu aimed to tilt the playing field in a previously competitive democracy, including by packing the judiciary, harassing opposition, muzzling the media, and institutionalizing expanded power through a new constitution.

But since 2020, Zambia has experienced the second-largest increase in the Freedom Index in the world. Critical to the country's rebound has been the work of international and domestic democracy practitioners in ensuring that the electoral system would remain competitive enough to allow for Zambians to choose their leaders. In 2021, despite violations noted by citizen and international observers, voters gave a mandate to opposition leader Hakainde Hichilema and the United Party for National Development. Hichilema's election raised hopes for democratization; according to a 2022 New York Times article, he entered office hailed as a "miracle worker" or "messiah." But democratic reform rarely results purely from the magic touch of this type of hero. Zambian activists are continuing their work to make sure that historically marginalized groups, including people with disabilities, women, and youth, have opportunities to exercise greater influence, including by advocating for the inclusion of a mixed-member proportional representation system to allow for representation of a more diverse set of voices in the legislature. In the face of recent incidents indicating a closing civic space, Zambian civil society has remained vigilant in continuing to push for promised legislative and constitutional reforms to protect key rights and freedoms, and allow opposition parties, activists, and citizens to freely assemble, express their views, and participate in Zambia's democracy. And as 2026 general elections draw nearer, citizen and international election observer groups will be critical to ensuring that Zambians can hold their leaders accountable for their promises, if they so choose.

Backsliding countries

In many other countries, the prospect of advancing freedoms today appears more remote. But as the cases above illustrate, trends are not destiny. In countries that are today backsliding, civic and political groups continue their work to build coalitions, carve out space in the public sphere, and prepare for opportunities, should they emerge.

The Sahel

Over the past four years, no region has experienced a greater decline in freedom and democracy than the Sahel. Military coups overthrew the civilian governments in Mali (2020), Chad (2021), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023). The military regimes have used the precarious security situation—and the alleged inability of the democratic governments to address it—as a pretext both for their seizure of power and their curtailment of individual rights. While Chad held disputed elections in May 2024, the military rulers in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger were becoming entrenched;

18 Charles T. Call, "What Honduras' Election Crisis Reveals About Latin America's Broader Democracy Challenges," Brookings Institution, December 4, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/what-honduras-election-crisis-reveals-about-latin-americas-broader-democracy-challenges/>.

19 Gustavo Palencia and Lizbeth Diaz, "Honduran Army Enforces Curfew After Vote Count Stalls," Reuters, December 2, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN1DW07B/>.

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collectively, they exited the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to form a new defense bloc and confederation, the Alliance of Sahelian States (AES), in July 2024. Niger canceled its military cooperation agreements with the United States; the last US troops left Niger in early August 2024. All three countries have welcomed Russian military advisers and troops. For US policymakers, the false argument that democracy impedes security may create a temptation to deemphasize issues of human rights and governance. In Burkina Faso, a significant portion of the country's territory is now outside of government control. Violent extremists are also rapidly gaining ground in Niger. Freedoms and human rights have significantly deteriorated. A conservatively estimated three million people have been forcefully displaced in the region due to the violence. A return to stable, civilian, democratic rule and a durably improved security will depend upon the resilience of democratic institutions and courageous activism of democrats inside these countries, as well as strong outside support.

Lebanon

Lebanon has historically been an important US partner in the Middle East, but the country has been experiencing a worrisome, steady democratic decline, recording a 7.8-point decrease in its Freedom Index score between 2018 and 2023. Lebanon has been in a political gridlock, unable to elect a new president since the end of former President Michel Aoun's term (at the end of October 2022). This, coupled with the worst economic and financial crisis in its history and high tensions along the border with Israel, have challenged the ability of the government to operate democratically. Yet Lebanese democracy champions are making strides in this challenging environment. With external support, community leaders are advocating for, planning, and implementing solutions to local problems, despite the political paralysis they see at the national level. Democracy assistance has helped increase citizens' awareness of rights and responsibilities and enhance their capacity to advocate for change and hold political leaders accountable. Aid also has been crucial to

foster interparty dialogue at the national and subnational levels, which will hopefully help stakeholders carve a way out of the current impasse. Lebanon's stability and prosperity are fundamental to advance US interests in the region, and Lebanese democracy champions increasingly need support to achieve these goals.

Nicaragua

Since the 2018 civic protests, Nicaragua has experienced an unprecedented increase in repression, human rights violations, and a systematic dismantling of democratic spaces led by President Daniel Ortega and his wife and vice president, Rosario Murillo. In November 2021, Ortega tightened his grip on power by winning a fourth consecutive term in an election deemed a "pantomime" by the White House, after illegally detaining forty opposition and civil society leaders and eliminating all political competition while committing massive electoral fraud. The US Department of State reports that independent citizen observer groups and international organizations noted that the 2021 elections were seriously flawed, lacked credibility, and had historically low voter turnout.²⁰ In the last five years, the regime has further intensified its oppressive measures, employing a range of repressive laws and tactics that have instilled widespread fear among the populace and democratic actors.²¹ The deliberate targeting of institutions that foster democratic engagement and protect human rights signifies a strategic effort to suppress any democratic opposition and maintain an authoritarian grip on power.²² To date, the Ortega-Murillo regime has forcibly shut down more than 3,500 civil society organizations and has closed and seized the assets of at least twenty-seven universities. Furthermore, since February 2023, the regime has increasingly exiled political, civic, and religious actors—seizing their assets and stripping them of their Nicaraguan nationality, a human rights violation.²³ Any chance for a peaceful return to democracy will require political and civil society actors in exile and in country to collaborate to present a unified, viable democratic alternative to the regime that both international stakeholders and citizens in Nicaragua can count on.

20 US Department of State, "2021 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Nicaragua," April 12, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/nicaragua/>.

21 Amnesty International, *Nicaragua: A Cry for Justice: Five Years of Oppression and Resistance*, 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/amr43/6679/2023/en/>; and Amnesty International, *Nicaragua: Silenced: Survivors of Sexual Violence and Their Struggle for Justice*, April 18, 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/amr43/6679/2023/en/>.

22 Human Rights Watch, "Nicaragua: Government Dismantles Civil Society," July 19, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/07/19/nicaragua-government-dismantles-civil-society>.

23 World Movement for Democracy, "Nicaragua: The Government Closes the Central American University (UCA)," September 1, 2023, <https://www.movedemocracy.org/nicaragua-the-government-closes-the-central-american-university-uca>; and Matthew Miller, US Department of State, "Sanctions on Nicaragua's Attorney General," Press Release, Office of the Spokesperson, March 21, 2024, <https://www.state.gov/sanctions-on-nicaraguas-attorney-general/>.

V. Conclusion

No democratization process is possible without the mobilization of strong domestic forces to fight for accountable institutions, inclusive representation, and good governance. In this sense, international assistance is not to be seen as the driving force of democratization but as a catalyzer of organic efforts to build or strengthen democracy. While its role should not be overestimated—as there is no amount of assistance that can make democracy blossom in completely infertile soil—it also should not be diminished.

The brief cases discussed here are an illustration that there is much more nuance in the impact and ramifications of democracy assistance than global indices alone can show. While broader democratic progress, as measured by these indices, is an ultimate goal, we need also to recognize the smaller wins that keep the seeds of democracy alive. In the current global environment, this is no small feat. Especially as autocratic actors are getting stronger and collaborating with each other,²⁴ we should not leave democratic actors to fight alone.

About the authors

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24 Christina Cottiero and Cassandra Emmons, "Understanding and Interrupting Authoritarian Collaboration," IFES, May 2, 2024, <https://www.ifes.org/publications/authoritarian-collaboration>.



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