

Many a bumpy road ahead remains on Africa's long walk to democracy

 By [Sindy Peters](#)

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The [Oslo Freedom Forum](#) (OFF) will make its debut in Africa on Monday, 26 March, in Johannesburg. Hosted by the [Human Rights Foundation](#) (HRF), in partnership with the [Nelson Mandela Foundation](#), the speaker lineup comprises a medley of hard-hitting heavyweights in the activist space, such as Zimbabwean civil rights activist and #ThisFlag movement leader Evan Mawarire, former Maldivian president Mohamed Nasheed, and Moroccan-born French free expression advocate and journalist Zineb El Rhazoui, among many others.

We interviewed [Thor Halvorssen](#), president and CEO of the HRF, to find out more about the forum and some of its achievements thus far, as well as the state of human rights in Africa in the 21st century.



Thor Halvorssen, president and CEO of the Human Rights Foundation

■ ***The Oslo Freedom Forum marks its 10th anniversary this year. What would you say are some of its greatest achievements over the last decade as a networking platform for advancing human rights?***

The greatest achievements are the meaningful connections that we facilitate at OFF. For example, Somali anti-FGM advocate Leyla Hussein and Pakistani women's rights advocate Maria Toorpakai spoke on the main stage at Lincoln Center at OFFinNY last year. Since then, they were invited as official panelists at the 2018 SXSW festival that took place on 12 March in Austin, Texas. This is the world's largest interactive festival and exposes Leyla and Maria to a huge new audience of creatives, media, and foundations looking to make a positive difference in the world.

Similarly, as a result of OFF, the North Korean defector Ji Seong-ho was profiled in a short video by *Business Insider* that received more than 640,000 views. His story — about how he went from a near-death experience on the North Korean border to freedom in South Korea, and to his work today rescuing North Koreans stuck in China and sending information

and truth into North Korea by radio — inspired thousands of people and has helped educate the world about how to assist the North Korean people. Earlier this year, Ji Seong-ho's story of endurance and survival was mentioned in the State of the Union speech by the president of the United States before the US congress.

These are only two of dozens of examples over the last 10 years. Through this period, HRF has successfully organised nine Oslo Freedom Forums in Norway, two of them in San Francisco and one in New York. In addition, close to ten College Freedom Forums in schools that include Yale University, Stanford University, Tufts University, and Universidad Francisco Marroquín in Guatemala. During these events, HRF successfully gathered more than 6,000 audience members, live-streamed content to more than 100,000 people, triggered more than 1,000 unique mainstream media articles about the Freedom Forum and our speakers, and earned more than 3,600,000 online views of our videos.

■ ***This year, OFF has added Johannesburg to its satellite itinerary. Why here and why now?***

In 2017, HRF established a collaboration with the Nelson Mandela Foundation to bring the Oslo Freedom Forum to South Africa in 2018, the 100th anniversary of Mandela's birth. So we're standing by our word and making this happen. Also, we only do Oslo Freedom Forums in democracies and only 13 out of the 54 countries in Africa are democracies according to our classification.

Unfortunately, liberal democracy is eroding in the world. According to HRF's own research, 95 of approximately 193 countries in the world are currently ruled by authoritarian regimes. As global citizens, whether in Africa or in North America, we have a responsibility to counter this trend and protect and promote the basic freedoms and individual liberties that are fundamental to a liberal democratic system.

In order to fulfill our mission to promote freedom and democracy "with a focus on closed societies", HRF has taken on classifying all countries in the world with an aim to distinguish democratic from authoritarian regimes. According to HRF's current numbers, the world currently has 111 democratic regimes, which account for 47% of the world's population or over 3.5-billion people; 42 competitive authoritarian regimes accounting to almost 16% of world population or almost 1.2-billion people; and 55 full-fledged dictatorships that oppress up to 2.8-billion people or 30% of the world's countries.

For HRF, democratic regimes are governments that, despite their governance shortcomings, economic conditions or personality of their leaders, govern with respect for the rule of law and the separation of powers, thus allowing large degrees of civil and political liberty and competition, which are best demonstrated by the existence of an independent judiciary, a vibrantly critical free press, an empowered political opposition, and periodic electoral contests that are both free and fair. Authoritarian regimes, on the other hand, deny these basic rights to their citizens either significantly or totally, while turning their polities into closing or closed societies.

When regimes deny political rights significantly but allow for small amounts of political competition, HRF considers these governments to be "competitive-authoritarian regimes" following the widely accepted definition proposed by Harvard University professor — and former Oslo Freedom Forum speaker — Steven Levitsky and Toronto University professor Lucan A. Way, in their book *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid regimes after the Cold War*. When political rights are

denied fully, HRF considers these regimes to be full-fledged authoritarian or dictatorial.



Oslo Freedom Forum to be hosted in Joburg this March

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■ ***We've just had a "new dawn" heralded by President Cyril Ramaphosa after a lengthy period of ongoing corruption and state capture by capitalist influences. Many South Africans put their faith in the law to address such issues but not much was done over eight to nine years and apathy became the order of the day. What are the best ways in which a citizenry can hold its government accountable when its institutions fail them?***

Democratic governments are in no way perfect and are as susceptible to corruption as authoritarian regimes are. But what ultimately sets democracies apart from authoritarian governments is that people have the freedom to hold those in power accountable for their actions, and there is a political opposition with a right to criticise and change government policy. Corruption is one of the factors that can make a government slide into populism and eventually into full-fledged authoritarianism, so it is important that the media and public intellectuals generally search for the truth, whether popular or not, on every public policy issue they expose and debate in the court of public opinion.

Even with historical challenges so grand as the ones South Africa has had to face due to the horrendous, authoritarian policy of Apartheid, a democratic country's institutions, political leadership, and the free press, have the duty to address the results of this shameful legacy and continue to move forward through sensible and smart public policy that benefits the general welfare of the country while protecting the civil and political rights of all citizens, not just those in office at a particular point in time.

If people, as you say, have lost their faith in the law, there are alternative avenues for them to hold the government accountable. Apart from the courts, vibrant civil society groups can mobilise action on a wide variety of issues, and push for transparency from the government. Advocacy campaigns being carried out by an engaged civil society will ensure that there is a well-informed and educated citizenry that will be equipped to hold the government accountable when institutions fail them.

Citizens can also take advantage of the freedom of the press. Media outlets and investigative journalism are tools that citizens can use to expose government corruption and reinforce the work that is being done by civil society groups.

Citizens living under authoritarian regimes do not have the luxury of this freedom, so they largely lack the ability to organise as you are still able to organise here in South Africa. And these, the stories of the perils and evils of dictatorship, are the stories that attendees will hear at the Oslo Freedom Forum.

■ ***How would you describe the state of human rights in Africa in the 21st century? Which countries stand out on either end of the spectrum and how did the nations that have it right get it right?***

Unfortunately, instead of moving into liberal democratic governance, a large part of post-colonial Africa has fallen into the grip of many brutal homegrown dictators, some of which have for decades enslaved their own people, promoted genocide, installed dynasties and devoted themselves to outright kleptocracy. Eritrea's Isaias Afwerki, Equatorial Guinea's Teodoro Obiang, Uganda's Yoweri Museveni, Chad's Idriss Déby, Cameroon's Paul Biya, Swaziland's King Mswati III, Sudan's Omar al-Bashir, the Republic of Congo's Sassou-Nguesso, and Zimbabwe's recently ousted Robert Mugabe are among the disastrous lineup of dictators that have ruled over the continent over the past few decades.

As HRF board member, former OFF speaker, and Ghanaian economist George Ayittey has put it in the past, "Africa is poor because she is not free," and he has asserted that the corruption of autocrats and the complacency of citizens are the bedrock problems in the majority of African states. As with most authoritarian leaders around the world, African leaders have maintained their rule by brutally cracking down on dissenting and opposition voices and extending or abolishing presidential term limits.

But even with the presence of these notorious dictators in Africa, there are still 13 democracies in Africa, including South Africa, which leaves open the prospects of further democratisation throughout the continent.

There are also 19 "competitive authoritarian regimes" in Africa in where there are elections, but the opposition cannot compete on an equal footing as the ruling party. These regimes have the chance to transit back into democracies.

In 2016, Yahya Jammeh, who ruled over the Gambia for 22 years, was surprisingly defeated in the presidential election. In 2017, Kenya experienced a presidential rerun after opposition candidate Raila Odinga challenged the election results of the August presidential election results in court. Although incumbent president Uhuru Kenyatta was still re-elected in October 2017, the fact that a rerun did take place reveals that the court was able to rule against the government and the opposition did have some ability to meaningfully compete.

The military coup against Robert Mugabe and his 37-year rule shows that while authoritarian leaders have dominated over Africa, their rule can and hopefully will soon come to an end.

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