



**AUTHORITARIANISM AND
TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS:
AUTHORITARIAN PARTNERSHIPS**

REPORT
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Executive Summary

Modern slavery, also known as “human trafficking” and “trafficking in persons,” exists everywhere, and is on the rise. In 2021, the organization Walk Free found that 50 million people are enslaved worldwide, with 28 million trapped in forced labor and 22 million in forced marriage. While human trafficking exists in every country, evidence suggests a country’s political regime type is a main determinant of its rates of human trafficking and the effectiveness of its anti-trafficking policies.

In the following report, the Human Rights Foundation (HRF) analyzes the connection between authoritarianism and trafficking in persons through a review of relevant literature and its analysis of the US Department of State’s Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report. The report focuses in particular on how authoritarian regimes influence or collaborate with one another to perpetuate trafficking across borders, looking at the case studies of North Korea, Cuba, and Ethiopia.

Through its review, HRF finds that authoritarian regimes are more likely than democracies to create “push factors” such as poverty, conflict, and persecution of minorities, which drive individuals to seek better options elsewhere, increasing vulnerability to exploitation. In many cases, authoritarian regimes are involved in the trafficking of their citizens in state-imposed forced labor. Authoritarian regimes are also less likely than democracies to engage in effective anti-trafficking efforts, such as victim support and prosecution of traffickers. Factors such as corruption and repression of civil society and the press prevent support for victims and accountability for perpetrators.

HRF’s analysis of the 2023 TIP Report found that 83 percent of Tier 1 countries were democratic. These countries were making active efforts to combat trafficking. In contrast, 81 percent of Tier 3 countries were those with authoritarian regimes. These countries were making little to no effort to combat trafficking. This follows the trend HRF found in previous reports, where countries with democratic governments made up between 90 and 95 percent of Tier 1 rankings, while 90 to 100 percent of Tier 3 was made up of countries with authoritarian regimes in the last five years.

Through the case studies that HRF presents on North Korea, Cuba, and Ethiopia, the report finds that in certain cases victims of human trafficking leave one country with an authoritarian regime only to be trafficked to another. In addition, these case-study countries collaborate with other authoritarian regimes in trafficking their citizens, making victims more vulnerable to abuses and exploitation.

Given the role that authoritarian regimes can have in perpetuating human trafficking, democratic reforms must be included in anti-trafficking efforts to be successful. Countries with civil and political rights, stable institutions, a free press, and a robust civil society improve conditions to allow victims to receive support and justice. Democracies must also be aware of their complicity and ensure they are not profiting from the forced labor of authoritarian regimes. Authoritarian regimes work together to perpetuate human trafficking and other human rights abuses; therefore, democracies must also work together as a united front to combat human trafficking from authoritarian regimes.

Introduction

A woman, fleeing the harsh conditions of her home country, is trafficked for sex, and then deported back to her country to face forced labor and torture. A doctor, seeking better pay and support for his family, joins a state-sponsored program to work abroad, only to have the state control his movements and exile him when he decides to leave the program. A laborer, displaced by conflict, travels to a different country for new opportunities, only to be forced to work long hours without pay, under threat of detention and deportation.

Modern slavery, also known as “human trafficking” and “trafficking in persons” exists everywhere, and is on the rise. In 2021, the organization Walk Free found that 50 million people are enslaved worldwide, with 28 million¹ trapped in forced labor and 22 million trapped in forced marriage. This number grew by 10 million from the organization’s 2018 estimates. Individuals’ vulnerability to trafficking occurs in tandem with current issues like increasing conflict, global democratic backsliding, and the economic and social impacts of environmental degradation and the COVID-19 pandemic.²

The UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children (known as the Palermo Protocol) defines trafficking in persons as “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons by means threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.”³ The Protocol specifically lists “sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs”⁴ as encompassed within the above definition.

The largest number of detected victims were found by the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) to be exploited for sex and labor.⁵ Sexual exploitation can occur in public settings, like the street or brothels, or in private or hidden venues, like hotels or homes.⁶ Labor exploitation exists across industries, including agriculture, fishing, and domestic work.⁷

¹ While the study by Walk Free considers forced marriage as an aspect of modern slavery, many organizations focus on the forced labor statistics. This brief focuses on the 28 million people subjected to forced labor.

² “The Global Slavery Index 2023,” Walk Free, 2023, <https://cdn.walkfree.org/content/uploads/2023/05/17114737/Global-Slavery-Index-2023.pdf>, 24.

³ “UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children,” United Nations General Assembly 55/25, November 15, 2000, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/ProtocolTraffickingInPersons.aspx>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ “Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2022,” UN Office on Drugs and Crime, Vienna, 2022, 23, https://www.unodc.org/documents/da-ta-and-analysis/glotip/2022/GLOTIP_2022_web.pdf, 23.

⁶ Ibid., v.

⁷ Ibid., 37.

INTRODUCTION

While slavery is found in every country, each country's response to human trafficking varies. HRF's previous research found democracies more effectively address human trafficking within their borders, while authoritarian regimes are less likely to. Authoritarian regimes are also more likely to perpetuate conditions that drive their citizens into slavery.⁸

This report will further explore the connection between authoritarianism and trafficking in persons, with a focus on how authoritarian regimes influence one another or collaborate to perpetuate human trafficking. Section II reviews the risk factors of human trafficking and their connection to authoritarianism. Section III presents HRF's analysis of regime types and their anti-trafficking efforts, using data from the US Department of State Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Reports. Section IV explores three case studies where authoritarian regimes collaborate in trafficking individuals. Section V presents a conclusion on the findings, while Section VI offers recommendations to combat human trafficking.

⁸ Kristen Anna, "Authoritarianism and Trafficking in Persons: Annual Policy Brief," Human Rights Foundation, 2023, https://hrf.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/final-AUTHORITARIANISM-AND-TRAFFICKING-IN-PERSONS_REPORT_singlepages-1.pdf.

Influence of Authoritarianism On Trafficking In Persons

While modern slavery exists in every country, certain factors increase individuals' vulnerability to trafficking and allow for trafficking operations to thrive with impunity. The majority of research on human trafficking has focused on these specific conditions, sometimes siloed from one another. However, HRF believes a country's political regime type is among the root causes for its rates of human trafficking and the effectiveness of its anti-trafficking policies.

In Walk Free's 2023 Global Slavery Index, the ten countries with the highest prevalence of modern slavery all are classified by HRF as authoritarian.⁹ Walk Free notes the countries share similar traits, like conflict, authoritarianism, and limited protections for civil liberties and human rights. Many also have large numbers of vulnerable people, such as refugees or migrant workers.¹⁰ HRF explores these factors further in this section to better understand the connection between authoritarianism and trafficking in persons..

PUSH FACTORS

Individuals become more vulnerable to exploitation when pushed by pre-existing factors. These "push factors" include poverty, limited economic opportunity, conflict, environmental disaster, political unrest, and persecution. These factors motivate individuals to seek better opportunities elsewhere. These opportunities, known as "pull factors" include better employment opportunities, security, and improved living conditions.¹¹

These factors can push individuals to migrate in search of better opportunities, which can then expose them to exploitation. During migration, they are separated from community and family support structures without access to legitimate forms of employment, legal status, and social protection. They may also work

⁹ The countries, in order of prevalence of modern slavery, are North Korea, Eritrea, Mauritania, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Tajikistan, United Arab Emirates, Russia, Afghanistan, and Kuwait. See "The Global Slavery Index 2023," Walk Free, 24.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ "Migration and Migrant Smuggling," UN Office on Drugs and Crime, accessed December 12, 2023, <https://www.unodc.org/e4j/zh/tip-and-som/module-5/key-issues/Migration-and-migrant-smuggling.html>.

in informal sectors where there are no labor protections.¹² When there are no other options, migrants may actively search for and accept known exploitative work when they believe that there are no other alternatives for them to fulfill their economic needs.¹³

Authoritarian regimes are more likely to have conditions that drive individuals to other opportunities. For example, extreme poverty is a significant metric of forced labor risk.¹⁴ According to the Multidimensional Poverty Index, the top ten countries with the largest percentage of the population living below the international poverty line of \$2.15 per day have, according to HRF's research, authoritarian regimes.¹⁵ Half of all impoverished people worldwide – 534 million people – live in Sub-Saharan Africa, which is characterized by predominantly authoritarian regimes.¹⁶

Authoritarian regimes are also more likely to be engaged in internal conflict or political instability in comparison to democracies. Conflict increases the number of trafficking victims both within and outside the crisis areas.¹⁷ Conflict leads to displacement, which creates ideal conditions for traffickers.¹⁸ Many of the major ongoing conflicts are occurring in countries with authoritarian regimes such as Burma, Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.¹⁹

Additionally, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Azerbaijan's takeover of Nagorno-Karabakh are examples of authoritarian regimes aggressively targeting neighbors, setting a potential new precedent for authoritarian "conflict resolution" through violence.²⁰ Since Russia invaded Ukraine, international concerns have been raised regarding the trafficking of women and children who fled Ukraine for neighboring countries.²¹ This was seen previously during the 2014 conflict in Ukraine, where the number of Ukrainian trafficking victims detected in Western Europe in 2016 quadrupled.²²

Africa is a particular concern for conflict. There have been several coups in West Africa, Central Africa, and the Sahel region since 2020, all taking place in authoritarian regimes.²³ These countries largely suffered

12 Fiona David, Katharine Bryant, and Jacqueline Joudo Larsen, "Migrants and Their Vulnerability to Human Trafficking, Modern Slavery and Forced Labour," International Organization for Migration, 2019, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/migrants_and_their_vulnerability.pdf, 5.

13 "Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2020," UN Office on Drugs and Crime, 2021, https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tip/2021/GLOTIP_2020_15jan_web.pdf, 71.

14 "Global Estimates of Modern Slavery: Forced Labour and Forced Marriage," Walk Free, September 2022, https://cdn.walkfree.org/content/uploads/2022/09/12142341/GEMS-2022_Report_EN_V8.pdf, 28.

15 The ten worst countries, in order from highest percentage living under the international poverty line, are Madagascar, Malawi, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Burundi, Mozambique, Zambia, Rwanda, Niger, Tanzania, and Uganda. See Sabina Alkire et al., "Global Multidimensional Poverty Index 2023," Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative and the United Nations Development Programme, 2023, <https://hdr.undp.org/system/files/documents/hdp-document/2023mpireportenpdf.pdf>, 20.

16 Ibid., 2.

17 "Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2022," UN Office on Drugs and Crime, IX.

18 Ibid., 45.

19 "The Top 10 Crises the World Can't Ignore in 2024," International Rescue Committee, updated December 13, 2023, <https://www.rescue.org/article/top-10-crises-world-cant-ignore-2024>.

20 Stephen Meister, "Nagorno-Karabakh: The Rise of Authoritarian 'Conflict Resolution,'" German Council on Foreign Relations, October 2, 2023, <https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/nagorno-karabakh-rise-authoritarian-conflict-resolution>.

21 "Global Estimates of Modern Slavery: Forced Labour and Forced Marriage," Walk Free, 45.

22 "Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2022," UN Office on Drugs and Crime, IX.

23 The African countries with successful coups since 2020 include Mali, Guinea, Chad, Sudan, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Gabon.

from weak democratic processes, leading to corruption, deepening ethnic strife, and an inability to tackle extremist threats.²⁴ In 2020, the UNODC found that 73 percent of trafficking victims originating from a country in conflict were from Sub-Saharan Africa, followed by 11 percent from North Africa and the Middle East (MENA).²⁵

Persecution and human rights abuses are more regularly committed by authoritarian regimes. In countries where there is little protection of civil liberties, regimes can easily target political opponents, critics, and minorities. In 2021, Minority Rights Group International (MRG) reported the top twelve countries where people were most under threat; all were countries with authoritarian regimes.²⁶ Targeted peoples listed by MRG included political opponents and Sunnis in Syria, Muslims in the Central African Republic, and Shias in Pakistan.²⁷ MRG found authoritarianism is a cause of instability and violence for minorities worldwide, with continuing threats against ethnic groups like the Rohingya in Burma, and new threats like the suppression of women in Afghanistan under the Taliban.²⁸

Other human rights abuses are often intertwined with human trafficking, particularly in authoritarian regimes. For example, the Rohingya Muslims in Burma have faced persecution for decades, including denial of citizenship. In 2017, the Burmese military led a campaign of violence against the Rohingya in the Rakhine State, including extrajudicial killings, rape, and arson. Hundreds of thousands of Rohingya fled

to neighboring countries like Bangladesh, while many remained persecuted in Burma.²⁹ With thousands of Rohingya living in precarious refugee camps outside of Burma or traveling to neighboring countries in search of better opportunities, exploitation increased. There is evidence of Rohingya being smuggled and trafficked in places like Thailand, Malaysia,³⁰ and Bangladesh.³¹ Burma perpetuates other human rights abuses, particularly following the 2021 coup by the Burmese military. The junta, still in power, has imprisoned and killed thousands of civilians and caused many others to flee the country.³²

24 Kent Mensah, "Africa's Coup Epidemic: Has Democracy Failed the Continent?" Al Jazeera, September 22, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2023/9/22/africas-coup-epidemic-has-democracy-failed-the-continent>.

25 "Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2022," UN Office on Drugs and Crime.

26 The countries listed are Syria, Somalia, South Sudan, Afghanistan, Yemen, Iraq, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan, Central African Republic, Myanmar, Pakistan, and Ethiopia. See "Peoples Under Threat 2021," Minority Rights Group International, 2021, https://minorityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/MRG_Brief_PUT2021_asA4Spreads.pdf_2.

27 Ibid.

28 "New Data Shows Rising Authoritarianism is Causing Instability and Violence for Minorities Worldwide," Minority Rights Group International, December 16, 2021, <https://minorityrights.org/2021/12/16/put-2021-pr/>.

29 "Myanmar: No Justice, No Freedom for Rohingya 5 Years On," Human Rights Watch, 24 August 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/08/24/myanmar-no-justice-no-freedom-rohingya-5-years>.

30 "The Global Slavery Index 2016," Walk Free, 2016, https://respect.international/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/The-Global-Slavery-Index-2016-Walk-Free-Foundation.pdf_148.

31 "Thousands at Risk of Trafficking Amid Rohingya Refugee Crisis," International Organization for Migration, July 31, 2018, <https://www.iom.int/news/thousands-risk-trafficking-amid-rohingya-refugee-crisis-iom>.

32 Richard C. Paddock, "Myanmar's Coup and Its Aftermath, Explained," The New York Times, December 9, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/article/myanmar-news-protests-coup.html>.

Persecution and human rights abuses are entwined with state-imposed forced labor, where individuals are forced to work by the regime itself. In 2021, an estimated 3.9 million people were trapped in state-imposed forced labor. This form of trafficking is present in compulsory prison labor, abuse of conscription, and forced labor for economic development. While prison labor is present in some democracies, most notably in the United States, widespread state-imposed forced labor can be found in many authoritarian regimes such as in the detention camps of North Korea or the army conscription in Eritrea.³³

One of the most significant examples of state-imposed forced labor and human rights abuses is China's campaign of repression against Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities. Since at least 2017, China has engaged in what the UN described as "crimes against humanity"³⁴ against Uyghurs through mass detention, torture, surveillance, forced sterilizations, and forced labor. China also facilitates the mass transfer of Uyghurs from Xinjiang to factories throughout the country to provide forced labor.³⁵ The Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) estimated that 80,000 Uyghurs were transferred out of Xinjiang to work in factories across China between 2017 and 2019. In the factories, Uyghurs face deplorable conditions with no pay. They typically live in segregated dormitories, undergo ideological training, and are subject to constant surveillance and limited freedom of movement.³⁶

PROTECTION AND PROSECUTION

Preventing risk factors is an important role of the state in preventing trafficking. Another important role is establishing strong anti-trafficking efforts. A multifaceted approach is crucial; countries must ensure victims are protected and traffickers are prosecuted. However, conditions in authoritarian regimes prevent victims from receiving justice and allow traffickers to operate with impunity.

Corruption prevents effective anti-trafficking efforts and is central to traffickers' success. Human trafficking is a lucrative business, generating an estimated \$150 billion in illicit profit in 2022.³⁷ Traffickers consider corruption a necessary investment to continue their work unimpeded. This can include bribing border control authorities and immigration officers to look the other way when transporting victims, bribing police officers

33 "Guardians and Offenders: Examining State-Imposed Forced Labor," Walk Free, accessed January 8, 2024, <https://www.walkfree.org/global-slavery-index/findings/spotlights/examining-state-imposed-forced-labour/>.

34 "OHCHR Assessment of Human Rights Concerns in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, People's Republic of China," UN Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights, August 31, 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/2022-08-31/22-08-31-final-assessment.pdf>, 44.

35 Lindsay Maizland, "China's Repression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang," Council of Foreign Relations, updated September 22, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/china-xinjiang-uyghurs-muslims-repression-genocide-human-rights>.

36 Xiuzhong Xu et al., "Uyghurs for Sale: 'Re-education,' Forced Labour and Surveillance Beyond Xinjiang," Australian Strategic Policy Institute and International Cyber Policy Centre, March 1, 2020, https://ad-aspi.s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/2022-10/Uyghurs_for_sale-11OCT2022.pdf?VersionId=N2JQOako7S4OTiSb6L7kKE5nY2d_LD25_3.

37 "2022 Trafficking in Persons Report," US Department of State, July 2022, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/20221020-2022-TIP-Report.pdf>, 18.

and prosecutors to obstruct cases or provide information on victims, and bribing legislators to not advocate for anti-trafficking legislation.³⁸

Corruption is one of the most important tools authoritarian regimes use to attain, consolidate, and maintain their power. Authoritarian regimes often have low accountability measures in place, allowing officials to engage in corrupt acts.³⁹ In Transparency International's 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index, the majority of the ten countries with the highest level of perceived corruption have, according to HRF's research, authoritarian regimes.⁴⁰ Higher levels of corruption correlate with lower levels of civil and political rights. High levels of corruption also threaten democratic practices and reform as authoritarian rulers hold onto power.⁴¹

Conversely, the rule of law is also necessary for victims to receive justice. Countries with the rule of law are characterized by accountability for government and private actors, fair adoption and enforcement of laws, enforcement of human rights, and impartial and accessible justice.⁴² Authoritarian regimes often lack the rule of law. In the World Justice Project's 2022 Rule of Law Index, the majority of the ten worst countries for rule of law have authoritarian regimes.⁴³ Countries with authoritarian regimes, such as Venezuela, consistently score low on the index's indicators like criminal justice and constraints on government powers.⁴⁴

Increased impunity results in victims being trafficked to more destinations. In 2022, the UNODC found that countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia were convicting fewer traffickers and detecting fewer victims; this coincided with increased identification of victims from these regions in other destination countries.⁴⁵ Without the rule of law, trafficking victims lack an effective avenue through which to challenge their abusers. Victims may face obstruction in seeking justice, or choose to not engage with the police or judiciary at all if the system cannot be trusted to uphold their rights.⁴⁶

Authoritarian regimes are more likely to prevent civil society from operating openly and effectively. The closing of civic space is a common trend in countries with authoritarian regimes, where civil society organizations

38 "Issue Paper: The Role of Corruption in Trafficking in Persons," United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2011, https://www.unodc.org/documents/human-trafficking/2011/Issue_Paper_-_The_Role_of_Corruption_in_Trafficking_in_Persons.pdf, 7.

39 "Module 3: Corruption and Comparative Politics," UN Office on Drugs and Crime and Global Resource for Anti-Corruption Education and Youth Empowerment, accessed November 14, 2023, https://grace.unodc.org/grace/uploads/documents/academics/Anti-Corruption_Module_3_Corruption_and_Comparative_Politics.pdf, 13.

40 The ten worst countries, in order from highest score of perceived corruption, are Somalia, Syria, South Sudan, Venezuela, Yemen, Libya, North Korea, Haiti, Equatorial Guinea, and Burundi. See "Corruption Perception Index 2022," Transparency International, January 2023, https://images.transparencycdn.org/images/Report_CPI2022_English.pdf, 2.

41 Gerardo Berthin, "Fighting Corruption is the Key to Countering Authoritarianism, and Protecting Human Rights," Freedom House, January 11, 2023, <https://freedomhouse.org/article/fighting-corruption-key-countering-authoritarianism-and-protecting-human-rights>.

42 "What is the Rule of Law?" World Justice Project, accessed November 14, 2023, <https://worldjusticeproject.org/about-us/overview/what-rule-law>.

43 The ten worst countries, in order from lowest overall index score, are Venezuela, Cambodia, Afghanistan, Haiti, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Nicaragua, Egypt, Burma, Cameroon, and Mauritania. See "Rule of Law Index 2023," World Justice Project, 2023, <https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index/downloads/WJPIIndex2023.pdf>, 23.

44 Ibid., 177.

45 "Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2022," UN Office of Drugs and Crime, VIII.

46 Prachi Vidwans and Malaak Jamal, "Authoritarianism and Trafficking in Persons," Human Rights Foundation, July 27, 2018, <https://hrf.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/HRF-policy-memo-2.pdf>, 2.

are targeted and shut down.⁴⁷ For example, China's Overseas NGO Law requires all foreign organizations to be monitored and overseen by a government-affiliated supervisory unit and limits their purview to non-contentious issues. Russia's Undesirable Organizations law allows the government the ability to blacklist any foreign or international organization and force them to shut down. Civil society organizations play an important role in providing services to trafficking victims and lobbying legislators for effective anti-trafficking reforms. Limited space for civil society therefore hinders organizations from providing these services.⁴⁸

Lastly, authoritarian regimes are more likely to hinder the freedom of the press. Freedom House has reported on a global decline of media freedom, with many authoritarian regimes increasing crackdowns on the media to prevent any reporting on regime wrongdoing.⁴⁹ Reporters Without Borders found continued aggression towards the press in its 2023 World Press Freedom Index, which reviews how freely media can operate in countries. Of the countries that performed worst on the World Press Freedom 2023 Index, all were those with authoritarian regimes.⁵⁰ Journalists are more at risk of harm in authoritarian regimes, where corruption and lack of rule of law allow attackers to target journalists with impunity. In the Committee to Protect Journalists' 2023 Global Impunity Index, the twelve countries with the worst records of prosecuting killers of journalists featured several countries with authoritarian regimes, with Syria as the worst offender.⁵¹ Without a free press to investigate and report on human trafficking, those involved may go unpunished.

Overall government responses to trafficking in persons, as measured by Walk Free, are notably divided along political regime types. The countries reported as taking the most action to combat human trafficking in 2023 were all democracies.⁵² The United Kingdom received the highest score, determined by milestones that include identifying and supporting survivors, effectively using criminal justice mechanisms, coordinating efforts at national and regional levels, addressing risk factors, and stopping the use of goods and services produced by forced labor. Conversely, the countries that took the least action in 2023 were all countries with authoritarian regimes.⁵³ The two worst offenders, North Korea and Eritrea, are characterized not only by their repressive regimes but by their use of state-imposed forced labor.⁵⁴

47 Andrew Heiss, "NGOs and Authoritarianism," Routledge Handbook of NGOs and International Relations, edited by Thomas Davies, 2019, chap. 38.

48 Vidwans and Jamal, "Authoritarianism and Trafficking in Persons."

49 Sarah Repucci, "Media Freedom: A Downward Spiral," Freedom House, 2019, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-and-media/2019/media-freedom-downward-spiral>.

50 The ten worst countries, in order from lowest overall index score, are North Korea, China, Vietnam, Iran, Turkmenistan, Syria, Eritrea, Burma, Cuba, and Bahrain. See "Index," Reporters Without Borders, accessed November 16, 2023, <https://rsf.org/en/index?year=2023>.

51 The ten worst countries, are Syria, Somalia, Haiti, South Sudan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Mexico, Philippines, Burma, Brazil, Pakistan, and India. See Arlene Getz, "Haiti Joins List of Countries Where Killers of Journalists Most Likely to Go Unpunished," Committee to Protect Journalists, accessed November 16, 2023, <https://cpj.org/reports/2023/10/haiti-joins-list-of-countries-where-killers-of-journalists-most-likely-to-go-unpunished/>.

52 The nine countries, listed in order of best performance, are United Kingdom, Australia, Netherlands, Portugal, United States, Ireland, Norway, Spain, and Sweden. See "The Global Slavery Index 2023," Walk Free, 220.

53 The five countries, listed in order of worst performance, are North Korea, Eritrea, Iran, Libya, and Somalia. See "The Global Slavery Index 2023," Walk Free, 220.

54 "Guardians and Offenders: Examining State-Imposed Forced Labor," Walk Free.

Data Analysis

To further understand the connection between authoritarianism and modern trafficking in persons as presented in the previous section, HRF assessed the rankings of countries in the 2023 TIP report and compared the rankings to the countries' political regime types to determine the further correlation between regime type and anti-trafficking efforts.

METHODOLOGY

Under the Palermo Protocol, member states are obligated to prevent and combat trafficking in persons. This includes protecting victims, including allowing them to remain in the destination country in appropriate cases, and preventing trafficking through efforts such as alleviating risk factors, training officials, and collaborating with civil society.⁵⁵

In addition, the United States Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) establishes minimum standards for states in combating trafficking.⁵⁶ The United States Department of State assesses states' compliance with TVPA on an annual basis in its TIP Report, one of the most widely cited texts on the subject. The TIP Report places countries into one of four tiers based on a "3P" paradigm of "prosecuting traffickers," "protecting victims," and "preventing the crime." The 3P paradigm is an approach reflected under both international law and the TVPA. The US Department of State also recognizes effective and multilateral partnerships as essential to the success of the 3P framework in global anti-trafficking efforts.⁵⁷ The TIP Report provides a description of the trafficking situation in each country or territory and analyzes the government's efforts to address trafficking, including the enactment of anti-trafficking laws and victim protection efforts.

⁵⁵ "UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children."

⁵⁶ "Trafficking Victim Protection Act: Minimum Standards for the Elimination of Trafficking in Persons," US Department of State, Div. A of Pub. L. No. 106-386, § 108, as amended 2000, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-106publ386/pdf/PLAW-106publ386.pdf>.

⁵⁷ "Trafficking in Persons Report 2023," US Department of State, June 2023, https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Trafficking-in-Persons-Report-2023_Introduction-V3e.pdf, 10.

The TIP Report ranks countries annually into four categories:

Tiers 1	Countries whose governments fully meet the TVPA's minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking.
Tiers 2	Countries whose governments do not fully meet the TVPA's minimum standards but are making significant efforts to bring themselves into compliance with those standards.
Tier 2 Watch List	<p>The governments of countries that do not fully meet the TVPA's minimum standards, but are making significant efforts to bring themselves into compliance with those standards, and for which:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The estimated number of victims of severe forms of trafficking is very significant or is significantly increasing and the country is not taking proportional concrete actions; or • There is a failure to provide evidence of increasing efforts to combat severe trafficking in persons from the previous year, including increased investigations, prosecutions, and convictions of trafficking crimes, increased assistance to victims, and decreasing evidence of complicity in severe forms of trafficking by government officials.
Tiers 3	The governments of countries that do not fully meet the TVPA's minimum standards and are not making significant efforts to do so. ⁵⁸

HRF categorizes states into three political regime types – democratic, hybrid authoritarian, and fully authoritarian.⁵⁹ HRF reviewed the classifications included in the 2023 TIP Report, which assessed government efforts to combat human trafficking from April 1, 2022, through March 31, 2023.⁶⁰ This review was taken in addition to the data collected by HRF from previous TIP reports. These reports were analyzed alongside HRF's political regime classifications to determine the probable correlation between regime type and anti-trafficking efforts.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 71.

⁵⁹ HRF monitors and measures political freedom in more than 200 countries and territories in the world. Currently an internal research effort, the organization expects to launch a "Tyranny Tracker," the first public-facing version of the global classification, by 2026.

⁶⁰ "Trafficking in Persons Report 2023," US Department of State, 69.

ANALYSIS OF THE 2023 TIP REPORT

HRF's analysis of the 2023 TIP Report found democratic regimes ranked better than authoritarian regimes in meeting the minimum standards for the elimination of human trafficking. Meanwhile, poorer-ranking states are more likely to be hybrid authoritarian and fully authoritarian regimes.⁶¹

83 percent of Tier 1 states were democratic. In contrast, 81 percent of Tier 3 countries were those with fully authoritarian regimes. Countries with hybrid and fully authoritarian regimes combined made up 95 percent of countries in Tier 3.

Table 1. An Analysis of the 2022 TIP Report

	Democratic	Hybrid Authoritarian	Fully Authoritarian
Tier 1	25, 83.33%	3, 10.00%	2, 6.67%
Tier 2	51, 49.04%	31, 29.81%	22, 21.25%
Tier 2 Watch List	13, 44.83%	5, 17.24%	11, 37.93%
Tier 3	1, 4.76%	3, 14.29%	17, 80.95%

Table 1. The first numbers indicate the number of countries in each tier and the second numbers represent the percentage of countries in the tier for the 2023 TIP Report.

This aligns with HRF's previous findings in its 2023 report on authoritarianism and trafficking in persons. HRF's analysis of the 2022 TIP report found 90 percent of Tier 1 countries were democratic. In contrast, 75 percent of Tier 3 countries had fully authoritarian regimes. Zero democracies were classified as Tier 3 in 2022, with countries with hybrid authoritarian and fully authoritarian regimes combined making up the full 100 percent.⁶²

The pattern has stayed largely consistent over the last five years. HRF found that between 2018 and 2022, democratic countries made up between 90 and 95 percent of Tier 1 rankings, while authoritarian regimes made up between 90 and 100 percent of Tier 3 rankings.⁶³ The 2023 report suggests a minor drop in democratic performance, with 83 percent of democracies ranked at Tier 1.

This analysis further bolsters the evidence found in Section II, where authoritarian regimes are less likely to engage in effective anti-trafficking efforts.

⁶¹ Countries listed as a "Special Case" within the TIP report were omitted from the analysis. Additionally, countries not classified by HRF were omitted from the analysis.

⁶² Anna, "Authoritarianism and Trafficking in Persons: Annual Policy Brief," 12.

⁶³ Ibid., 13.

Case Studies

This report is particularly focused on the connection between authoritarian regimes in perpetuating trafficking. Most victims of trafficking move from lower-income to higher-income areas domestically, or to countries with a higher GDP. Victims who are trafficked across borders are most frequently detected in neighboring countries within the region of origin or nearby.⁶⁴ In regions like Africa, the Middle East, and Eurasia, where authoritarian regimes are more prevalent, this could lead to victims leaving one authoritarian regime only to be trafficked to another. Additionally, transnational victims of trafficking from Sub-Saharan Africa and East Asia have been increasingly detected in the Middle East, which is heavily comprised of authoritarian regimes.⁶⁵

If trafficked in an authoritarian regime, victims will face even greater obstacles to escape slavery. As previously discussed and explored further in Section III, authoritarian regimes are less likely to effectively implement anti-trafficking efforts. Victims are less likely to be supported and traffickers are less likely to be prosecuted.

In some cases, authoritarian regimes actively collaborate in trafficking their citizens. Countries like North Korea, Cuba, and Ethiopia strike deals to send workers to other authoritarian regimes. While in these destination countries, workers are subjected to forced labor and human rights abuses. Meanwhile, the origin countries generate a profit from the workers they provide.

NORTH KOREA TO CHINA AND RUSSIA

North Korea, a fully authoritarian regime and totalitarian state, controls every aspect of its people's lives. In 2014, a landmark UN inquiry into the human rights situation in North Korea found abuses and crimes against humanity on a scale "that does not have any parallel in the contemporary world."⁶⁶ The country consistently ranks as Tier 3 in the US Department of State's TIP reports due to its continued use of

⁶⁴ "Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2022," UN Office on Drugs and Crime, 45.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 42.

⁶⁶ "Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea," UN Human Rights Council, February 7, 2014, A/HRC/25/63, https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/co-idprk/reportofthe-commissionof-inquiry-dprk_365.

state-imposed forced labor in prison camps and on the country's overseas workers.⁶⁷ Walk Free ranked North Korea as having the weakest government response to forced labor in 2023.⁶⁸

North Korea holds an estimated 80,000 to 120,000 individuals in political prison camps, detention facilities, and "re-education" camps. All prisoners, including children, are forced to work long hours in harsh conditions. They work in various sectors, including factories, agriculture, logging, mining, information technology, and construction. In addition to forced labor, prisoners are subject to abuses such as beatings, torture, rape, no medical care, insufficient food, and unhygienic living conditions.⁶⁹ In 2023, the organization Korea Future published a report documenting hundreds of human rights violations across North Korea's penal system, including positional torture, denial of food, and forced abortions.⁷⁰

North Korea also sends workers to other countries to generate profit for the regime. The practice began in 1966 when North Korea signed an agreement with the Soviet Union to send workers there.⁷¹ The program expanded globally over the next several decades, with North Korea generating a profit between \$1.2-2.3 billion in 2012.⁷² North Korean workers have been reported in 45 countries over the years, working in places like logging camps in Russia, factories in China, and construction sites in Kuwait.⁷³

The North Korean regime uses deceitful practices when sending workers abroad, promising them significant pay. However, the workers are paid only a portion of the value of their contract, with the salaries deposited into accounts controlled by the regime. The regime withholds up to 90 percent of the workers' wages, using that money to generate annual revenue for itself.⁷⁴ Once abroad, the workers' passports or other identification documents are often confiscated. The workers are denied freedom of movement and only receive one to two days of rest per month. They work on average 16 hours a day.⁷⁵ North Korean officials closely surveil the workers, and threaten reprisal against the workers and their families if they attempt to escape or seek help.⁷⁶

67 "2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: North Korea," US Department of State, June 2023, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-trafficking-in-persons-report/north-korea/>.

68 "Guardians and Offenders: Examining State-Imposed Forced Labor," Walk Free.

69 "2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: North Korea," US Department of State.

70 "The Accountability Imperative: Torture & Ill-Treatment in the DPRK Penal System," Korea Future, 2023, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/608ae0498089c163350e0ff5/t/6419f27cc10fd11ae5b0439b/1679422079452/Korea+Future-The+Accountability+Imperative.pdf>.

71 Tamara Troyakova and Elena F. Tracy, "Is There a Transnational Korean Identity in Northeast Asia? The Case of Korean Diaspora in the Russian Far East," *Asian Perspective* 42, no. 3 (2018): 387-410, <https://doi.org/10.1353/apr.2018.0017>.

72 Shin Chang-Hoon and Go Myong-Hyun, "Beyond the UN COI Report on Human Rights in DPRK," The Asean Institute for Policy Studies, <http://en.asaninst.org/contents/asan-report-beyond-the-coi-dprk-human-rights-report/>, 21.

73 Choe Sang-Hun, "North Korea Exports Forced Laborers for Profit, Rights Groups Say," *The New York Times*, February 19, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/20/world/asia/north-koreans-toil-in-slavelike-conditions-abroad-rights-groups-say.html>.

74 "2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: North Korea," US Department of State.

75 "Beyond the UN COI Report on Human Rights in DPRK," The Asean Institute for Policy Studies, 24.

76 "2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: North Korea," US Department of State.

In 2017, UN sanctions on North Korea ordered the country's overseas laborers to be repatriated home by 2019.⁷⁷ However, North Korea continues to send workers abroad, largely with the help of fellow authoritarian regimes like China and Russia. Increasing sanctions from the international community and the COVID-19 pandemic dented North Korea's revenue. China and Russia have helped North Korea evade the sanctions through various loopholes, such as accepting workers on tourist and student visas.⁷⁸ For example, in 2022, Russia issued or reissued 4,723 visas to North Koreans in an apparent attempt to circumvent the UN's 2017 order. In 2023, South Korean media estimated there were 100,000 North Korean workers in China and between 3,000 and 4,000 in Russia.⁷⁹

Both China and Russia are listed as Tier 3 in the 2023 US Department of State TIP Report. In addition to China's state-imposed forced labor of Uyghurs⁸⁰ and Russia's trafficking of Ukrainians,⁸¹ both countries were implicated in using North Korean forced labor and failing to address the trafficking of North Koreans within their borders.⁸²

In addition to widespread state-imposed forced labor, the oppressive and impoverished conditions of North Korea push individuals to flee the country. Many flee to China through the northern border between the two countries. With 70 percent of defectors believed to be women, there is a high risk of sex trafficking when defectors attempt to cross into China. In 2023, Global Rights Compliance described a \$105 million sex and bride trafficking industry where women flee North Korea only to be trapped in China.⁸³ The women are forced by traffickers into commercial sex in brothels or through internet sex sites, or forced to work as hostesses in nightclubs or karaoke bars.⁸⁴ There is also a lucrative market for forced marriages due to the higher proportion of men than women in China.⁸⁵

Human rights organizations have criticized China for enabling trafficking from North Korea. In addition to not adequately implementing anti-trafficking efforts, China treats undocumented North Koreans as illegal immigrants rather than refugees.⁸⁶ China forcibly repatriates North Korean refugees back to their home country, where they face punishment through forced labor in prison camps, torture, and death.⁸⁷ China creates further vulnerability in the form of children born to undocumented North Korean mothers and

77 Rick Gladstone and David E. Sanger, "Security Council Tightens Economic Vise on North Korea, Blocking Fuel, Ships and Workers," The New York Times, December 22, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/22/world/asia/north-korea-security-council-nuclear-missile-sanctions.html>.

78 Choe Sang-Hun, "North Koreans Trapped in 'State-Sponsored Slavery' in Russia," The New York Times, April 3, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/03/world/asia/north-korea-human-rights.html>.

79 Kim Jieun, "North Korea Brings Home Around 700 of its Workers from China and Russia," Radio Free Asia, August 29, 2023, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/repatriate-08292023143955.html>.

80 "2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: China," US Department of State, June 2023, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-trafficking-in-persons-report/china/>.

81 "2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: Russia," US Department of State, June 2023, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-trafficking-in-persons-report/russia/>.

82 Ibid.

83 Nicola Smith, "Inside China's 'Red Zone' where North Korean Women are Sold as Slaves," The Telegraph, March 24, 2023, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2023/03/24/inside-chinas-red-zone-where-north-korean-women-sold-slaves>.

84 "2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: North Korea," US Department of State.

85 "A Struggle for Survival: Trafficking of North Korean Women," Wilson Center, March 3, 2008, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/struggle-for-survival-trafficking-north-korean-women>.

86 Jung Min-ho, "Beijing 'Actively Enables' Trafficking of North Korean Women, Girls: Rights Groups," The Korea Times, updated July 21, 2023, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2024/01/103_355380.html.

87 Smith, "Inside China's 'Red Zone' where North Korean Women are Sold as Slaves."

Chinese fathers.⁸⁸ The approximately 30,000 children of these unions are not legally recognized, rendering them more likely to be exploited.⁸⁹

Russia also does not adequately implement anti-trafficking efforts. In 2022, Russia did not screen any North Koreans in the country for trafficking or open any investigations into instances of trafficking. Since 2016, an agreement between Russia and North Korea has allowed Russia to deport North Koreans back to their country, even if they are refugees. Russia continues to cooperate with North Korea in returning North Koreans who fled the country and were residing in Russia. Similar to North Koreans forcibly returned from China, the returnees likely face severe punishment for escaping.⁹⁰

CUBA TO VENEZUELA

Cuba, a fully authoritarian regime, engages in both state-imposed forced labor and repressive tactics against its critics. While the 2023 US Department of State TIP Report noted some minor efforts to improve trafficking-related legislation, the country remained at Tier 3 due to its continued involvement in forced labor in its foreign medical missions' program, managed by the Unidad Central de Cooperación Médica, the Cuban Ministry of Health, and the Cuban Ministry of Foreign Trade and Investment.⁹¹

Cuba relies on the export of its services to fund its regime. The country collects \$6 to \$8 billion from its exported workforce, 75 percent of which is made up of medical professionals.⁹² Since the 1960s, Cuba has sent over 400,000 medical professionals to 164 countries to provide support during short-term crises, natural disasters, and, more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic.⁹³ The program expanded during the pandemic as the demand for doctors globally increased and Cuba faced the worst economic crisis since the collapse of the Soviet Union.⁹⁴ In 2021, there were roughly 28,000 Cuban medical professionals in over 60 countries.⁹⁵

88 Jung, "Beijing 'Actively Enables' Trafficking of North Korean Women, Girls: Rights Groups."

89 "2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: North Korea," US Department of State.

90 "2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: Russia," US Department of State.

91 "2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: Cuba," US Department of State, June 2023, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-trafficking-in-persons-report/cuba>.

92 Ibid.

93 "Cuba: Repressive Rules for Doctors Working Abroad," Human Rights Watch, July 23, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/07/23/cuba-repressive-rules-doctors-working-abroad>.

94 Ezra Fieser and Matthew Bristow, "Cuba is Exporting Doctors to Make Up for Lost Tourism Revenue," Bloomberg, June 15, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-06-16/coronavirus-pandemic-cuba-s-doctors-battle-virus-around-world>.

95 "2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: Cuba," US Department of State.

The Cuban regime is the sole employer in the health sector; medical professionals cannot practice privately or be employed independently.⁹⁶ Many are compelled into the foreign medical missions program due to the economic situation in Cuba and potential reprisal from the regime.⁹⁷ A 2021 complaint from Prisoners Defenders to the International Criminal Court (ICC) and UN reported that of the 405 testimonies it received from individuals previously involved in the missions, 70 percent did not volunteer at all. Many volunteered due to a lack of better economic options, or due to feeling compelled to avoid negative perceptions in their work and personal life and to return the debt owed to the regime for receiving free education.⁹⁸

Once enrolled in the foreign medical missions, medical professionals are often not informed of their final destination or the terms of their contract. The Cuban regime pockets 75 to 95 percent of the medical professionals' wages, similar to North Korea's practice with its exported labor. For example, in 2022, the Mexican government paid Cuba \$3500 per worker monthly; the workers only received \$200 of that pay. The medical professionals also often have their passports withheld and are limited in their movements and interactions with locals. Participants have reported working long hours without rest and with inadequate living conditions. Threats and sexual abuse are common.⁹⁹

The Cuban regime reserves harsh punishment for medical professionals who attempt to leave the mission. Notably, those who defect from the mission can be subject to either eight years in prison or an eight-year de facto entry ban to Cuba.¹⁰⁰ 100 percent of those who reported abandoning the mission in Prisoners Defenders' complaint to the ICC and UN were subject to the entry ban, regardless if they still had family in Cuba.¹⁰¹

While dozens of countries around the world have used Cuba's foreign medical missions program, few have been as supportive as Venezuela's fully authoritarian regime. In 2000, Cuba and Venezuela signed an agreement where Cuba would provide Venezuela with medical professionals in areas where healthcare services were lacking. In turn, Venezuela agreed to provide Cuba with 53,000 barrels of oil per day. The Venezuelan model was replicated profitably in several other countries, including in 2013 in Brazil, a democracy, through its *Mais Médicos* program.¹⁰² In 2018, Brazil's president-elect Jair Bolsonaro criticized the program, calling it "slave labor."¹⁰³ When Bolsonaro stated the program could only continue with reforms, including Brazil directly paying the medical professionals, Cuba chose to instead end the program in Brazil.

96 Maria C. Werlau, "Forced/Compelled Labor (Trafficking in Persons): Cuba's 'Internationalist Medical Missions,'" Free Society Project/Cuba Archive and Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation, February 1, 2021, <https://cubaarchive.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/2021-TIP-Cuba-Information-Submission-Final.pdf>, 3.

97 "Cuba: Repressive Rules for Doctors Working Abroad," Human Rights Watch.

98 "Extension of Complaint: Cuba's 'Internationalization Missions' (II) and Communication of Response to Cuba in the Special Procedure Reference 'AL CUB 6/2019,'" Prisoners Defenders, 2021, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1UyLbvZOymrcNNRNHgd6ELA9AC6PGMT7u/view>, 29.

99 "2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: Cuba," US Department of State.

100 "Cuba: Repressive Rules for Doctors Working Abroad," Human Rights Watch.

101 "Extension of Complaint: Cuba's 'Internationalization Missions' (II)," Prisoners Defenders, 35.

102 Connectas and Anthony Sutterman, "Neglect at Home, Profits Abroad: Cuba's Medical System," Global Voices, November 22, 2021, <https://globalvoices.org/2021/11/22/neglect-at-home-profits-abroad-cubas-medical-system/>.

103 Michael Weissenstein and Marcelo de Sousa, "Cuba Ends Medical Exchange Program with Brazil," AP News, November 14, 2018, <https://apnews.com/general-news-ecb41d0622df4022abd8724607faa505>.

Meanwhile, Venezuela and Cuba have continued their partnership to mutual advantage. In 2019, Cuban medical professionals in Venezuela reported being told to use their services to coerce individuals into voting for President Nicolás Maduro, who was up for re-election at the time. Cuban medical professionals were required to go door-to-door to offer medicine and warn residents they would be cut off from medical services if they did not vote for Maduro or his candidates. Others were instructed to deny treatment to opposition supporters. These coercive tactics resemble other practices Maduro has used to remain in power.¹⁰⁴

As of 2023, there were between 19,500 and 21,000 Cuban medical professionals working in Venezuela,¹⁰⁵ where they face abuses such as robbery, rape, and death.¹⁰⁶ In 2022, 17 Cuban medical professionals in Venezuela attempted to defect to Colombia but were arrested by the Maduro regime and returned to Cuban authorities to face eight years of imprisonment.¹⁰⁷

Venezuela is also ranked at Tier 3 in the US Department of State TIP report, given its permissible environment of trafficking by non-state armed groups and lack of attempts to prosecute traffickers.¹⁰⁸ In 2018, Walk Free listed Venezuela as having the highest rate of trafficked persons in Latin America, with 5.6 per 1,000 people. Cuba was ranked fourth with 3.8 per 1,000 people.¹⁰⁹

ETHIOPIA TO SAUDI ARABIA

In Ethiopia, a fully authoritarian regime, individuals face a high risk of exploitation largely due to conflict and climate change. In June 2023, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) reported 4,385,789 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the country, with the majority affected by the two-year civil war between the Ethiopian regime and the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and by drought. Other ongoing conflicts and climate disasters put Ethiopians at continued risk of displacement.¹¹⁰

IDPs and individuals in resettlement camps are vulnerable to trafficking, lacking access to their usual support networks, education, economic opportunity, and justice. The 2023 US Department of State TIP

104 Nicholas Casey, "It is Unspeakable: How Maduro Used Cuban Doctors to Coerce Venezuela Voters," The New York Times, March 17, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/17/world/americas/venezuela-cuban-doctors.html>.

105 "2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: Venezuela," US Department of State, June 2023, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-trafficking-in-persons-report/venezuela/>.

106 Werlau, "Forced/Compelled labor (Trafficking in Persons): Cuba's 'Internationalist Medical Missions,'" 12.

107 "2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: Venezuela," US Department of State.

108 Ibid.

109 "Americas Report: The Global Slavery Index 2018," Walk Free, 2018, <https://cdn.walkfree.org/content/uploads/2023/04/13184755/GSI-2018-Regional-Report-Americas-EN.pdf>, 27.

110 "Ethiopia National Displacement Report 16," International Organization for Migration, April 28, 2023, <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/ethiopia-national-displacement-report-16-november-2022-june-2023>, 10.

Report ranked Ethiopia at Tier 2, an upgrade from the previous report given its efforts to combat trafficking in recent years, including launching its first national trafficking hotline. However, the report noted Ethiopia still needs to improve in several areas, including addressing the massive scale of child trafficking within its borders and the exploitation of Ethiopians seeking work abroad.¹¹¹

Saudi Arabia, also a fully authoritarian regime, relies heavily on cheap migrant labor. In 2023, there were 10.9 million foreign workers in Saudi Arabia, constituting 75 percent of the total workforce of the country. Saudi Arabia is the primary destination for Ethiopian migrants seeking economic opportunity, representing 80 to 90 percent of Ethiopian labor migration.¹¹² There are approximately 750,000 Ethiopians living and working in Saudi Arabia,¹¹³ with 400,000 to 500,000 residing there without official travel documentation.¹¹⁴

Saudi Arabia uses the kafala, or sponsorship, system, where an employee's immigration status is bound to an individual employer or sponsor, known as the kafeel. In this system, the sponsor is responsible for the employee.¹¹⁵ With the sponsor in full control of an employee's legal status, vulnerability to exploitation is increased. Migrant workers in Saudi Arabia have experienced passport confiscation, physical and verbal abuse, wage nonpayment, poor working conditions, and restrictions on movement.¹¹⁶ Workers who leave their employer without consent can be charged with "absconding" and face imprisonment and deportation, even in cases where the worker is fleeing abuse.¹¹⁷

Ethiopian migrants face the risk of trafficking on their journey to Saudi Arabia, following the eastern route through either Djibouti or Somalia, then Yemen – countries that have authoritarian regimes. Once in Saudi Arabia, Ethiopians also face the risk of trafficking, particularly those without valid visas. Ethiopian workers employed under the kafala system also face challenges, including stigmatization and abuse, which can lead to loss of employment and deportation.¹¹⁸ Saudi Arabia has previously been criticized for its treatment of migrants, particularly Ethiopians. For example, in 2020 an investigation found the country was keeping thousands of African migrants, predominantly Ethiopians, in detention centers to slow the spread of COVID-19. Inmates reported inhumane conditions, beatings, and other abuses in the detention centers.¹¹⁹

111 "2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: Ethiopia," US Department of State, June 2023, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-trafficking-in-persons-report/ethiopia/>.

112 Ibid.

113 "'They Fired on Us Like Rain' Saudi Arabian Mass Killings of Ethiopian Migrants at the Yemen-Saudi Border," Human Rights Watch, August 21, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/08/21/they-fired-us-rain/saudi-arabian-mass-killings-ethiopian-migrants-yemen-saudi>.

114 "2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: Ethiopia," US Department of State.

115 Kali Robinson, "What is the Kafala System?" Council on Foreign Relations, updated November 18, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/background/what-kafala-system>.

116 "2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Saudi Arabia," US Department of State, March 20, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/saudi-arabia/>.

117 "Saudi Arabia: Labor Reforms Insufficient," Human Rights Watch, March 25, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/25/saudi-arabia-labor-reforms-insufficient>.

118 Ibid.

119 Will Brown, "Investigation: African Migrants 'Left to Die' in Saudi Arabia's Hellish Covid Detention Centres," The Telegraph, August 30, 2020, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/climate-and-people/investigation-african-migrants-left-die-saudi-arabias-hellish/>.

In 2021, Saudi Arabia enacted its Labor Reform Initiative, which aimed to ease restrictions on migrant workers, short of fully dismantling the kafala system. The reforms included giving private sector workers the ability to change employers, obtain exit and re-entry visas, and obtain exit visas at the end of their contract or after one year, without the previous employer's permission. However, many human rights organizations criticized the reforms as insufficient.¹²⁰ In addition to not fully abolishing the exit visa, the reforms excluded large groups of workers, including 3.6 million domestic workers, farmers, shepherds, home guards, and private drivers, who are already the most vulnerable to abuse.¹²¹ In 2023, Saudi Arabia remained at Tier 2 in the US Department of State TIP Report, given its inadequate protections for domestic workers and lack of support for victims.¹²²

In early 2023, Saudi Arabia lifted a ban on labor migration from Ethiopia that was enacted in 2020 to curb the spread of COVID-19. The three-year ban was characterized by abuses against Ethiopian migrants, both by Saudi Arabia and Ethiopia. In addition to holding Ethiopians in detention centers, Saudi Arabia also deported thousands of Ethiopians, including ethnic Tigrayans, back to their home country. Once there, thousands of Tigrayans were once again held in detention centers, falsely accused of association with the TPLF, and subjected to beatings and enforced disappearance by the Ethiopian regime.¹²³

Despite Saudi Arabia's abuses against Ethiopian workers, the ties between the two regimes remain strong. With the migration ban lifted, the Ethiopian regime organized a recruitment program in 2023 to send 500,000 women to Saudi Arabia to provide domestic work, at the request of the Saudi regime.¹²⁴ This agreement was also expected to provide Ethiopia with much-needed cash after the high costs of the civil war with the TPLF.¹²⁵ The program aimed to reduce risk for migrant workers, mainly by transporting the workers via plane to Saudi Arabia, rather than the workers undertaking the dangerous route across Yemen.¹²⁶

However, despite Ethiopia's attempts to improve the migration system, these workers are still at risk given Saudi Arabia's poor human rights record and treatment of migrants. Domestic workers in particular continue to be at risk of exploitation, due to a lack of protection under Saudi Arabia's labor laws.¹²⁷

120 Ibid.

121 "Saudi Labour Reforms to Come into Force," Migrant-Rights.org, March 13, 2021, <https://www.migrant-rights.org/2021/03/saudi-labour-reforms-to-come-into-force-tomorrow/>.

122 "2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: Saudi Arabia," US Department of State, June 2023, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-trafficking-in-persons-report/saudi-arabia/>.

123 "Ethiopia: Returned Tigrayans Detained, Abused," Human Rights Watch, January 5, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/01/05/ethiopia-re-turned-tigrayans-detained-abused>.

124 Zecharias Zelalem, "Ethiopia Recruits 500,000 Women for Domestic Work in Saudi Arabia," Al Jazeera, April 17, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2023/4/17/ethiopia-recruits-500000-women-for-domestic-work-in-saudi-arabia>.

125 Samuel Getachew, "Ethiopia: New Scheme to Export Maids to Saudi Arabia After Ban Due to Rights Abuses Lifted," The Africa Report, June 1, 2023, <https://www.theafricareport.com/310995/ethiopia-new-scheme-to-export-maids-to-saudi-arabia-after-ban-due-to-rights-abuses-lifted/>.

126 Zelalem, "Ethiopia Recruits 500,000 Women for Domestic Work in Saudi Arabia."

127 Ibid.

CROSS-REGIONAL COMPARISONS

While the countries in the case studies are spread out across regions, they share similar tactics in trafficking their citizens. They make deals, often with other countries that have authoritarian regimes, to supply workers in exchange for profit. Countries like Cuba and North Korea keep the majority of the workers' pay, using the money to fund their regimes. While workers from these three countries may willingly go to find opportunities unavailable in their home countries, many face abusive conditions once abroad. In all three cases, restricted movement, confiscated passports, and poor living conditions were common. While in these situations, workers are also vulnerable to other abuses. In all three cases, access to remedies and protections was not likely, given the authoritarian nature of both the source and destination countries. If sent back to their home countries, the workers from all three cases were likely to face further abuses, such as imprisonment and torture. This effectively traps workers between two authoritarian regimes and keeps them vulnerable to further exploitation and abuse.

Conclusion

As addressed in the previous sections, authoritarian regimes are characterized by factors that increase the risk of trafficking, such as poverty, limited economic opportunity, conflict, environmental disaster, political unrest, and persecution. Individuals in these regimes often seek better opportunities, both domestically and abroad, putting them at risk of exploitation. A lack of human rights, particularly for minorities, in these regimes allows trafficking to occur alongside other human rights abuses. In cases such as North Korea, the state itself perpetuates human rights abuses and modern slavery in the form of state-imposed forced labor.

In addition to creating these risks, authoritarian regimes are less likely than democracies to implement effective anti-trafficking efforts. Corruption and a lack of an independent judiciary can hinder attempts to bring traffickers to justice. Authoritarian regimes are also more likely to suppress civil society and journalists within their borders, keeping them from supporting victims and holding governments accountable. This correlation is bolstered by HRF's analysis of the US Department of State TIP reports, which rank countries on their anti-trafficking efforts through the "3P" paradigm of "prosecuting traffickers," "protecting victims," and "preventing the crime." HRF found in 2023 the majority of countries in Tier 1 which meet the minimum standards to address trafficking, were democracies. Conversely, the majority of countries in Tier 3 which do not meet the standards nor make significant efforts to do so, were countries with authoritarian regimes.

Another concerning aspect to consider is individuals who leave one authoritarian regime only to be trafficked in another. Many individuals who leave the repressive climate of an authoritarian regime may end up in nearby authoritarian regimes, where they receive no support or justice from their home country or their destination country. In some cases, authoritarian regimes collaborate with one another to traffic individuals to generate profits. This can be seen in the case studies, where regimes like North Korea, Cuba, and Ethiopia send workers to be used as forced labor in places like China, Venezuela, and Saudi Arabia, respectively.

Overall, human trafficking exists worldwide across democracies and authoritarian regimes. However, the research presented in this report concludes that authoritarian regimes are more likely to facilitate trafficking by creating risk factors and not undertaking adequate anti-trafficking efforts. This suggests a country's political regime type is the foundational factor in preventing or perpetuating trafficking in persons.

Recommendations

Human trafficking is often intertwined with other human rights abuses, unstable and corrupt politics, and less space for civil society. Therefore, improving civil and political rights in countries with authoritarian regimes will help address the root risks of trafficking and increase anti-trafficking efforts. Countries with civil and political rights, stable institutions, a free press, and a robust civil society improve conditions to allow victims to come forward and receive support. It also allows for the accountability of traffickers and related corrupt actors through fair judicial processes and independent reporting.

Therefore, in countries with authoritarian regimes, any anti-trafficking plan must promote democratic reform as part of its efforts. This can make the prospect of change bleak, particularly in regimes where human trafficking is widespread or state-imposed. However, this emphasizes the need for domestic and international anti-trafficking advocates to consider the intersection of civil and political rights with anti-trafficking efforts or programming implemented in countries with authoritarian regimes.

Democracies also have a role to play. In addition to advocating for democratic reforms in countries with authoritarian regimes, democracies must also ensure they are not benefitting from forced labor from these regimes. At the root of human trafficking is profit. Authoritarian regimes may fund each other through forced labor, as discussed in the case studies. However, democracies, by ensuring they are not using forced labor from authoritarian regimes, can help reduce the amount of profit these regimes receive. Some positive steps have been taken in this regard, such as the United States prohibiting imports made from Uyghur forced labor in China.¹²⁸ However, many democracies are still complicit, including in the use of Cuba's foreign medical missions.¹²⁹

As described in this report, authoritarian regimes work together to perpetuate human trafficking and other human rights abuses. Therefore, democracies and the international community must also work together as a united front to combat human trafficking from authoritarian regimes.

128 See "Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act," US Customs and Border Protection, <https://www.cbp.gov/trade/forced-labor/UFLPA>.

129 Cuban medical professionals have previously been used in democracies such as Portugal and Italy. See "2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: Cuba," US Department of State. Mexico started hiring Cuban medical professionals in 2022. See "Mexico President Says Hiring Cuban Doctors, Praises Cuban Counterpart," Reuters, May 9, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/mexico-president-says-will-hire-500-cuban-doctors-work-mexico-2022-05-09/>.

Appendix A

US DEPARTMENT OF STATE TIP REPORTS DATA

Country Breakdown

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Democratic	96	92	93	92	92	90
Hybrid Authoritarian	40	40	40	41	41	42
Fully Authoritarian	51	52	52	52	52	52
Authoritarian (HA and FA)	91	92	92	93	93	94
Total	187	184	185	185	185	184

Breakdown of countries in TIP Reports by number of countries.

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Democratic	51.34%	50.00%	50.27%	49.73%	49.73%	48.91%
Hybrid Authoritarian	21.39%	21.74%	21.62%	22.16%	22.16%	22.83%
Fully Authoritarian	27.27%	28.26%	28.11%	28.11%	28.11%	28.26%
Authoritarian (HA and FA)	48.66%	50.00%	49.73%	50.27%	50.27%	51.09%
Total	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Breakdown of countries in TIP Reports by percentage in each tier.

*4 countries in the 2018 TIP Report are categorized as a "Special Case," instead of under a specific tier. 3 countries in the 2020, 2021, 2022, and 2023 TIP Reports are categorized as a "Special Case," instead of under a specific tier.

COUNTRIES IN TIER 1

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Democratic	37	31	31	25	27	25
Hybrid Authoritarian	1	1	1	1	1	3
Fully Authoritarian	1	1	2	2	2	2
Authoritarian (HA and FA)	10	2	3	3	3	5
Total	39	33	34	28	30	30

Breakdown of countries in Tier 1 in the TIP Reports by number of countries.

COUNTRIES IN TIER 1

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Democratic	94.87%	93.94%	91.18%	89.29%	90.00%	83.33%
Hybrid Authoritarian	2.56%	3.03%	2.94%	3.57%	3.33%	10.00%
Fully Authoritarian	2.56%	3.03%	5.88%	7.14%	6.67%	6.67%
Authoritarian (HA and FA)	30.73%	6.06%	8.82%	10.71%	10.00%	16.67%
Total	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Breakdown of countries in Tier 1 in the TIP Reports by percentage.

COUNTRIES IN TIER 2

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Democratic	345	51	49	50	50	51
Hybrid Authoritarian	16	20	19	25	28	31
Fully Authoritarian	19	19	19	20	21	22
Authoritarian (HA and FA)	35	39	38	45	49	53
Total	80	90	87	95	99	104

Breakdown of countries in Tier 2 in the TIP Reports by number of countries.

COUNTRIES IN TIER 2

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Democratic	56.25%	56.67%	56.32%	52.63%	50.51%	49.04%
Hybrid Authoritarian	20.00%	22.22%	21.84%	26.32%	28.28%	29.81%
Fully Authoritarian	23.75%	21.11%	21.84%	21.05%	21.21%	21.15%
Authoritarian (HA and FA)	43.75%	43.33%	43.68%	47.37%	49.49%	50.96%
Total	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Breakdown of countries in Tier 2 in the TIP Reports by percentage.

COUNTRIES IN TIER 2 WATCHLIST

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Democratic	11	8	11	17	15	13
Hybrid Authoritarian	19	15	17	10	7	5
Fully Authoritarian	12	14	14	15	11	11
Authoritarian (HA and FA)	31	29	31	25	18	16
Total	42	37	42	42	33	29

Breakdown of countries in Tier 2 Watchlist in the TIP Reports by number of countries.

COUNTRIES IN TIER 2 WATCHLIST

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Democratic	26.19%	21.62%	26.19%	40.48%	45.45%	44.83%
Hybrid Authoritarian	45.24%	40.54%	40.48%	23.81%	21.21%	17.24%
Fully Authoritarian	28.57%	37.84%	33.33%	35.71%	33.33%	37.93%
Authoritarian (HA and FA)	73.81%	78.38%	73.81%	59.52%	54.55%	55.17%
Total	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Breakdown of countries in Tier 2 Watchlist in the TIP Reports by percentage.

COUNTRIES IN TIER 3

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Democratic	2	2	2	0	0	1
Hybrid Authoritarian	4	4	3	5	5	3
Fully Authoritarian	16	15	14	12	15	17
Authoritarian (HA and FA)	20	19	17	17	20	20
Total	22	21	19	17	20	21

Breakdown of countries in Tier 3 in the TIP Reports by number of countries.

COUNTRIES IN TIER 3

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Democratic	9.09%	9.52%	10.53%	0.00%	0.00%	4.76%
Hybrid Authoritarian	18.18%	19.05%	15.79%	29.41%	25.00%	14.29%
Fully Authoritarian	72.73%	71.43%	73.68%	70.59%	75.00%	80.95%
Authoritarian (HA and FA)	90.91%	90.48%	89.47%	100.00%	100.00%	95.24%
Total	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Breakdown of countries in Tier 3 in the TIP Reports by percentage.

Appendix B

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FROM HRF

Reports

- [Authoritarianism and Trafficking in Persons: Policy Memo](#) (2018)
- [Human Trafficking in Cuba's Medical Missions](#) (2022)
- [Authoritarianism and Trafficking in Persons: Annual Policy Brief](#) (2023)
- [Saudi Arabia's Human Trafficking Mechanisms](#) (2023)
- [Arabic Edition of Saudi Arabia's Human Trafficking Mechanisms](#) (2023)
- [Sex Trafficking in Cuba: A Form of Gender-Based Violence and Human Trafficking](#) (2024)

Other Publications

- [Human Trafficking Has a Hidden Cause – and It's on the Rise Worldwide](#) (2019)
- [Uncovering The Links Between Authoritarianism and Human Trafficking](#) (2020)
- [Refugees, Human Trafficking, and Authoritarianism](#) (2022)
- [Authoritarianism Lies at the Heart of Human Trafficking](#) (2022)
- [World Day Against Trafficking in Persons: How Corruption Drives Modern Slavery](#) (2023)
- [The Silent Chains of Saudi Arabia: My Fight for My Daughter and Our Freedom](#) (2023)

