

ANNALS OF AUTOCRACY

Opinion | They opened the door.  
The dictators were waiting.



By the Editorial Board

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Sarada Taing was worried sick.

A U.S. citizen who was born in Cambodia, he was running from Washington an online, independent news broadcast for audiences in Cambodia and around the world. On his weekday Khmer-language video talk show, which draws between 50,000 and 80,000 viewers, he airs investigative reports on corruption, money laundering, land grabs, deforestation, human rights abuses and human trafficking — challenging the authoritarian government.

On June 19, just weeks before a Cambodian election, Sarada got two audio messages on Facebook Messenger from a pro-government social media celebrity in Cambodia. In the first message, the man told Sarada he “would chop my head off if I entered Cambodia.” In the second, the man asserted that he had friends outside Cambodia and “they also don’t like you.” The threat was repeated in a Facebook Live conversation the celebrity hosted from Cambodia on June 22, during which the man said he would not hesitate to kill Sarada.

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With a history as a human rights investigator in Cambodia and years of journalism experience with Cambodian radio, Voice of America and Radio Free Asia, Sarada was accustomed to confronting hostility, but now he felt directly threatened. He has a young son, and his wife's elderly parents live with the family. He replaced the locks on his doors, added a digital security code and installed video surveillance. Then he wrote an email to the FBI and the State Department. "I fear for my life and the life of those close to me due to my work as a journalist," he wrote. "I am so scared." Two FBI special agents interviewed him and checked back later, saying they are pursuing the case.

He is not alone. Around the world, dictators are dispatching assassins, kidnappers, secret police and private investigators to abduct, harass, intimidate and harm dissidents, journalists, academics and others far beyond their borders. Transnational repression, as it is called, is spreading faster than democracies can cope with it. As Freedom House noted in a landmark study 2½ years ago, dictatorships struck back at activists and journalists who were using the internet to campaign for human rights from afar. The authoritarian regimes learned to respond in the same way, through spyware and online harassment, and have taken their campaigns a major step further, with surveillance, threats, disruption, kidnapping and violence.

Freedom House has built a database of incidents over the past nine years involving direct physical repression. It had 608 cases when unveiled in February 2021 and now contains 854 incidents by 38 perpetrators in 91 countries. The top 10 perpetrators in the database are China (253), Turkey (132), Tajikistan (64), Russia (46), Egypt (45), Turkmenistan (36), Uzbekistan (36),





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(45), Turkmenistan (36), Uzbekistan (36), Belarus (30), Iran (23) and Rwanda (18.) A [report by Human Rights Watch](#) recently documented cases of killings, kidnappings, attempted kidnappings, enforced disappearances and physical attacks targeting Rwandans living abroad. But the [Government Accountability Office](#) concluded in an October report that U.S. law “does not specifically criminalize or define” transnational repression and that a “lack of common understanding” about the threat, especially among state and local law enforcement, has hampered the response.

This editorial is part of a series, [Annals of Autocracy](#), examining how authoritarian regimes around the world work. Transnational repression is one of their tools. It targets people who have done nothing more than exercise their rights to free expression, association or belief — people who are struggling for democracy and basic human liberties. In many cases, they were forced to flee their homeland.



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