



THE PENINSULA

State Department Annual Human Rights Report for 2024 – Six Months Late and Significantly Cut Back

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The U.S. Department of State's [Annual Country Reports on Human Rights Practices](#) for 2024 was released on August 12. Coverage from journalists and human rights analysts was highly critical of the Donald Trump administration's human rights efforts under the foreign policy leadership of Secretary of State Marco Rubio:

- “Rubio recasts long-held beliefs with cuts to Human Rights Reports. The State Department’s annual assessment, covering 198 countries and territories, arrives a half-year late with significant cuts and little fanfare from America’s top diplomat.” ([The Washington Post](#))
- “State Department slashes its annual reports on human rights.” ([NPR](#))
- “U.S. report halves pages on North Korea human rights, eschews criticism of political system.” ([The Korea Herald](#))
- “State Department butchers human rights abuse report for the new Trump era... Claims of anti-white racism, omission of anti-LGBTQ discrimination and whitewashing of dictators mar a MAGAified human rights report.” ([MSNBC](#))
- “US: Rights Report Mixes Facts, Deception, Political Spin. State Department Omissions and Whitewashing Undermine US Credibility, Risks Lives.” ([Human Rights Watch](#))
- The report “dramatically softens criticism of some countries that have been strong partners of the Republican president . . . El Salvador and Israel, which rights groups say have extensive records of abuses. . . but sounded an alarm on the erosion of freedom

of speech in Europe and ramped up criticism of Brazil and South Africa, with which Washington has clashed on a host of issues.” (Reuters)

The annual country reports have shaped the United States’ human rights policy since the first report was published in 1977 at the beginning of the Jimmy Carter administration. For half a century, both Republican and Democratic presidents have annually issued these reports and contributed to the evolution of the quality and value of the documents. As such, the reports have been objective and praiseworthy.

Politicizing the Human Rights Report

The 2024 human rights report has been slashed by more than half the length compared to previous reports. The report has also been politicized by the Trump administration. For example, information on women’s rights and LGBTQ rights has largely been omitted from the 2024 report.

Rather than providing an objective factual analysis of human rights issues, this year’s report gives more information about the state of relations between the Trump administration and other countries. Countries with human rights issues, but which the Trump administration considers friendly, are treated leniently. On the other hand, countries with good human rights policies but that have foreign policy differences with the Trump administration are criticized and their records distorted. For instance, Israel is treated leniently in the report, despite human rights groups highlighting serious human rights violations committed by the country—not a word is said about Israel’s ongoing abuses against Palestinians in Gaza, although daily news reports tell of depredation and destruction over the last two years.

El Salvador’s human rights record is also whitewashed in the reports, although President Nayib Bukele has systematically dismantled checks and balances in the government. The president was re-elected to office despite a constitutional provision prohibiting the immediate reelection of a president, and El Salvador is holding in its prisons a large number of individuals deported from the United States without an appropriate judicial determination in U.S. courts.

Furthermore, the Trump administration expresses concern about the “erosion of freedom of speech” in Europe, particularly in countries that have been highly critical of the Trump administration’s policies over the last six months. But Hungary receives a positive evaluation in the report, despite having one of the worst human rights records in the European Union. It is no surprise that autocratic Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban was hosted by Trump at Mar-a-Lago last year but did not meet with then U.S. President Joe Biden.

In past years, it was a general practice for the secretary of state to hold a press conference to discuss and respond to questions about the annual human rights report. Occasionally, the secretary would issue a written statement on the report if a press conference was not possible. Significantly, Secretary Rubio made no public comment on the release of the report.

Democratic lawmakers have accused Trump and Rubio of treating human rights as a “cudgel” to be used against adversaries. “Rubio’s State Department” has “shamelessly turned a once-credible tool of US foreign policy mandated by Congress into yet another

instrument to advance MAGA political grievances and culture war obsessions,” said [Gregory Meeks \(NY-D\)](#), the ranking Democratic member of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs.

North Korea and the Human Rights Report

The 2024 human rights report on North Korean human rights was half the length of the [2023 report issued by the Biden administration](#). The 2024 report also [avoided topics critical of the North](#). There was no criticism or even comment on North Korea’s hereditary rule. Previous reports criticized the Kim family’s authoritarian grip on political power. One of the statements from the 2023 report that did not appear in the latest report was: “North Koreans cannot choose their government through free and fair elections and no opposition parties are allowed.”

During Trump’s first term (2017–2021), U.S. policy on North Korean human rights underwent a major flip-flop. Trump’s first term began with [harsh criticisms](#) of Kim Jong Un regarding the regime’s bleak human rights record. Trump’s [first State of the Union Speech](#) to Congress even included extensive criticism of the country’s human rights abuses, with North Korean human rights victims seated next to First Lady Melania Trump during the speech. A day or so later, the North Korean refugees were given a White House meeting with the president. Five months later, however, Trump and Kim held a much-publicized [summit in Singapore](#) with promises of a new era of friendship, followed by a summit in Hanoi in February 2019 and a summit at the demilitarized zone in June 2019.

So far under Trump’s second term, there appears to be little interest in either Washington or Pyongyang to seek better bilateral relations. North Korea is receiving considerable attention from Russia, selling military equipment and ammunition and providing over ten thousand soldiers to support Russia’s ongoing war to seize large parts of Ukraine. Trump has been preoccupied with domestic political and economic issues and efforts to significantly strengthen his control over government agencies and federal programs. Trump’s international agenda has primarily focused on imposing tariffs on goods and services coming into the United States and ending the war in Ukraine. Meanwhile, the Trump administration appears to be keeping its options open with North Korea by significantly toning down criticisms of its human rights record.

It is noteworthy that since becoming secretary of state, Marco Rubio has had little to say about North Korea. As a U.S. senator representing Florida, Rubio was an outspoken advocate for human rights in Cuba and elsewhere in the world, including North Korea. Before becoming secretary of state, he was a leading voice on human rights in North Korea. He authored legislation in the Senate to reenact and extend the [North Korean Human Rights Reauthorization Act of 2022](#). His legislation was adopted by the Senate, but the House of Representatives failed to act, and the legislation was not enacted into law. In 2024, the [House adopted legislation](#) introduced by Congresswoman Young Kim (R-CA). Rubio reintroduced a Senate version of the legislation in 2023 to extend the North Korean Human Rights Act. This time, the House approved the legislation, but the Senate failed to act.

As secretary of state, Rubio has stated he is seeking to find a special envoy for North Korean human rights. But his statement was made in a hearing before the House Foreign Affairs Committee in response to a question from Congresswoman Kim. Rubio responded

that the appointment process is “underway” to find the “right person” as special envoy.

The prospects for movement, especially when considering the language of the State Department’s report on North Korean human rights, appear bleak.

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Photo from the Secretary of State.

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