

**Tracking Terror:  
The Political Terror Scale  
1980-2001**

Linda Cornett  
and Mark Gibney

August 3, 2003

**Commissioned by the  
Human Security Centre**

Over the past half century human rights have gained unprecedented attention from the international community and human rights norms have been codified in a growing body of international treaties and instruments. However, human rights abuses remain all too common in practice. One of the most important tools for promoting compliance with international human rights norms comes from persistent public and scholarly scrutiny. The Political Terror Scale (PTS) is a rare and invaluable tool in this effort. For the last twenty years, teams of human rights scholars and students have translated two independent annual human rights reports (Amnesty International's and the US State Department's) into a numerical scale measuring states' human rights record on a yearly basis. The PTS is based on a 5 point interval scale as follows.

Level 1: Countries operate under a secure rule of law. People are not imprisoned for their views and torture is rare or exceptional. Politically-motivated murders are extremely rare.

Level 2: There is a limited amount of imprisonment for nonviolent political activity. However, few persons are affected and torture and beatings are exceptional. Politically-motivated murder is rare.

Level 3: Imprisonment for political activity is more extensive. Politically-motivated executions or other political murders and brutality are common. Unlimited detention, with or without a trial, for political views is also commonplace.

Level 4: The practices of level 3 affect a larger portion of the population and murders, disappearances, and torture are a common part of life. In spite of its pervasiveness, on this level political terror affects those who interest themselves in politics.

Level 5: The terrors characteristic of level-4 countries, encompass the whole population at level 5. The leaders of these societies place no limits

on the means or thoroughness with which they pursue personal or ideological goals.

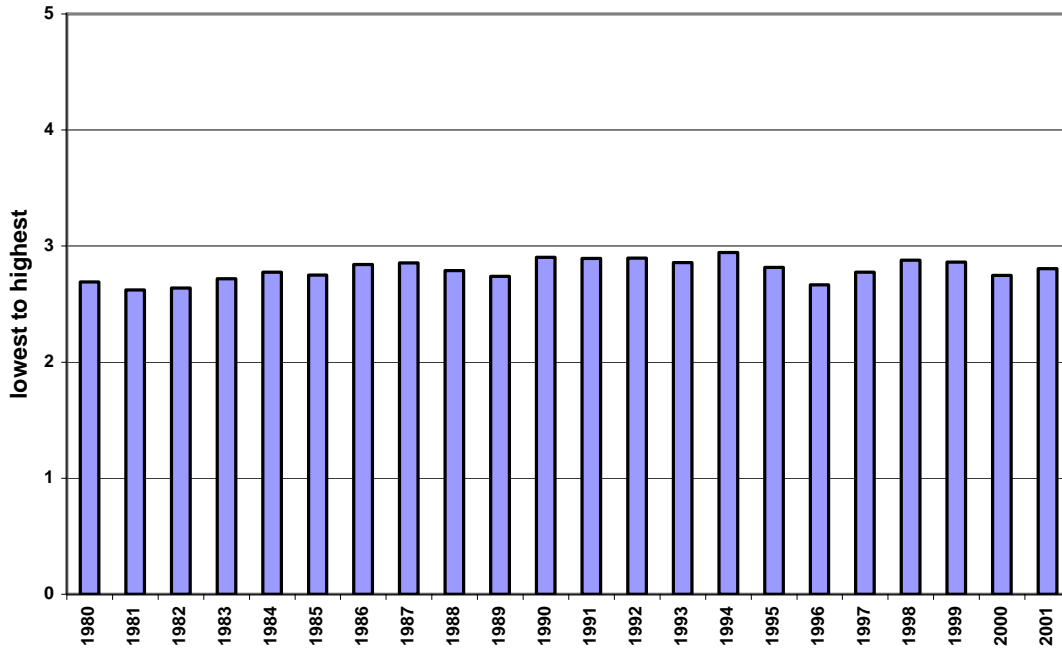
The PTS allows scholars and advocates to monitor, report, study, and evaluate states' human rights record against prevailing norms, in comparison to one another, in relation to other social variables, and over time. A review of the data reveals several interesting trends and raises several more questions.

One of the most striking trends is that average scores across developing countries have remained fairly constant over the twenty-two year period for which the scale was produced.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Scores for developed countries were omitted for the purposes of reviewing trends because Amnesty and US State Department reports for developed countries are sporadic and seemingly arbitrary. For example, Japan is routinely reviewed but Canada is never reviewed. France and Germany are routinely reviewed but the United Kingdom, Spain, and Italy are not. Uneven reporting is less apparent among the developing countries and individual omissions probably less misleading simply because of the larger number of cases represented. Nonetheless, there are still some reporting inconsistencies. Costa Rica, for example, is sometimes reviewed and sometimes not, presumably because it has not had a history of human rights abuses that have invited sustained international scrutiny. Some discrepancies are simply the result of the emergence of new countries, especially following the collapse of the Soviet empire. Thus while 105 countries were represented in the scale in 1980, that number gradually increased to over 136 in 2001, with a significant increase between 1991 and 1992.

**Figure 1**  
**Average Political Terror Scores,**  
**1980-2001**



As Figure 1 illustrates, the average terror score for developing countries between 1980 and 2001 ranged from a low of 2.3 in 1982 to a high of 2.9 in 1994. The standard deviation – the spread of scores around the mean – increases slightly over the twenty-two year period, indicating a small increase in the variability of average terror scores. However, there was a significant increase in the variability between 1980 and 1994, on the magnitude of about 30%.

Nonetheless, several countries stand out on the extremes. Nine countries have an average terror score of 4 or more over the 20 year life-span of the scale: Afghanistan (4.8); Iraq (4.7); Colombia (4.5); Sri Lanka (4.3); Iran (4.2); Angola (4.2); Sudan (4.2); Myanmar (4.1) and Guatemala (4.0). Nine countries also scored lower than 1.5, although several have enjoyed independence for less than the full twenty year span of the data base: São Tomé and Príncipe (1.4); United Arab Emirates (1.4); Trinidad and Tobago (1.4); Estonia (1.4); Cypress (1.3); Slovak Republic (1.3); Costa Rica (1.2); and Lithuania (1.2).

The otherwise fairly stable average terror scores may surprise many scholars. For example, the average terror scores may seem low to human rights scholars and advocates, who are keenly aware of the depth and breadth of human rights abuses over the last decades. Africanists too, who have witnessed a spate of human rights tragedies in Africa in recent years, might be surprised to see that average terror scores have not increased substantially. Conversely, Latin Americanists may be surprised to learn that global averages do not reflect the human rights improvements that many Latin American countries have experienced in recent years.

In fact, global averages do mask significant regional trends. In the early 1980s, average political terror scores by region were fairly closely aligned but have slowly but steadily diverged since then. As Figure 2 demonstrates, human rights abuses increased slowly but steadily in both South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa; increased slightly in the Middle East; and declined in East Asia and the Pacific, the Western Hemisphere, and in Europe and Eurasia.

**Figure 2**  
**Average Political Terror Scores, 1980-2001**  
**by region**

