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Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman and distinguished Members of the Commission. I thank the Commission for drawing attention to the issues relating to the status of civil society and human rights defenders worldwide.

Thirty-five years ago, when the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor was created, NGOs barely existed outside the United States and Western Europe. Working with an NGO, Human Rights First, I first went to Uganda in the early 1980's and found there were no human rights NGOs in Uganda or in most countries on the African continent. Today, we find NGOs of every stripe in Africa and in almost every country in the world. There are thousands of brave people operating in these countries, including in a number of highly repressive environments, finding ways to help their fellow citizens.

There has also been a change in the nature of these "civil society" groups themselves. In the United States, we tend to categorize such groups as political activists, journalists, bloggers, human rights advocates, public-interest lawyers, netizens, and so on. In much of the world, though, these categories aren't particularly meaningful. In countries where governments fundamentally fear their citizens, the more meaningful divide is between citizens who dare to come together to engage in public dialogues on issues of the day, and those who remain silent.

Around the world, however, the ranks of those who are engaged is growing. In democracies and authoritarian countries alike, the advent of new connective technologies has allowed people to find others who share their interests – whether their tastes in music or their views about politics. Citizens connected to the global Internet understand that they are not alone. They have transformed communications, commerce, entertainment, education and innovation, everywhere. In some places, they have also peacefully challenged the political order.

The common thread to civil society groups is the manner in which they pursue their goals. In an era of violence, terrorism, and even bullying, the civil society groups we discuss today tend to focus on education, opening minds, fostering understanding and building bridges, and now engage peacefully.

Secretary Clinton described civil society this way in her July 2010 speech to the Community of Democracies in Krakow, calling it that "collection of activists, organizations, congregations, writers, and reporters that work through peaceful means to encourage governments to do better, to do better by their own people."

In practice, urging governments to do better by their own people means anything from monitoring environmental practices to promoting food safety, delivering humanitarian assistance or making micro-loans to empower the poor, calling for protection for the rights of women, LGBT people, religious minorities, or disabled persons, or demanding that local authorities be bound by the rule of law. In some cases, civil society has helped to organize and channel the people power that has transformed societies from the Philippines to South Africa, from Timor Leste to Tunisia.

The idea that citizens can and should press their governments to *do* better and to *be* better has caught on all over the world. It is not surprising that some governments find this threatening. Some react by blaming outside forces for violating their sovereignty and stirring up dissent. To us, these groups are only gathering and amplifying indigenous voices that have too long been silenced. But to their governments they pose a threat to stability and to their own power.

So let me be clear: This is a challenging time. In countries of the Arab Awakening and around the world the landscape is sobering. From Astana to Colombo to Addis Ababa – and from Russia to Egypt to China –governments have taken steps to quash freedoms of expression, association and assembly. Since last December, Egypt has undertaken legal action against several U.S., Egyptian, and other NGOs, and countries as diverse as Russia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Algeria, Malaysia, Kyrgyzstan, Venezuela, and Vietnam have considered or enacted new or additional restrictions on the ability of civil society to act. Each of these countries has their own history, culture, politics and experience with civil society, which affects their actions. There is no doubt many of these governments see themselves as vulnerable to widespread unrest by populations dissatisfied with closed political systems, corruption or impunity, or the absence of the rule of law and genuine economic opportunity, even in some places where macro-economic growth has been impressive.

The pushback from governments comes in many forms. Some governments are making it tougher to form an NGO. For example, in January Algeria adopted a new Law on Associations that could permit the government to deny licenses for political reasons. Other governments are actively constraining the foreign funding

of their civil society organizations. Bangladesh is considering a Foreign Donations (Voluntary Activities) Regulation Act that would require organizations to get approval to carry out projects with foreign funding. In neighboring Pakistan, a bill on the foreign funding of NGOs was presented to the Senate in February.

Other governments are taking measures to restrict freedom of assembly. In Malaysia, we are concerned about a law that includes a ban on streets protests. In Belarus, as recently as February, the government even imprisoned an activist for displaying teddy bears that were holding protest banners. In Russia, we have been troubled by reports of violence in recent days, by the arrests of thousands of demonstrators, and by images of police mistreatment of peaceful protesters.

We are also focused on restrictions on freedom of expression and the significant number of restrictions on journalists and bloggers who are in jail around the world. Many more are practicing self-censorship for fear of fines or other forms of official harassment, or for fear of violence.

These types of restrictions are neither new nor unexpected. Restrictions on reformers and organizations and restrictions on freedom of expression are a common phenomenon during periods of democratic change. In a number of places – Croatia and Serbia come to mind – post-authoritarian turmoil led to backsliding, and similar hostility to NGOs . But the slow, tough slog toward democracy went on and these groups and societies have emerged stronger.

Democratic activists around the world have always faced a slow, tough slog. But they have always been able to count on the moral support of the United States. We must hold our nerve and sustain our engagement with those citizens who continue to advocate for peaceful change from within.

President Obama began his career as a community organizer and Secretary Clinton as a lawyer for an NGO, the Children's Defense Fund. Yesterday the Secretary spoke eloquently about these issues at the second annual strategic dialogue with civil society at the State Department. She understands instinctively the need for engagement with civil society – and how governments who do engage become stronger. And she was clear that the United States will continue to reach beyond governments to engage directly with the citizens of other societies.

In Krakow, the Secretary said "democracies recognize that no one entity — no state, no political party, no leader — will ever have all the answers to the challenges we face." Governments that believe otherwise underperform, in every

decade, in every region of the world. Meanwhile, their citizens look around at other countries and aspire to a better life for themselves and their children. I agree with the Secretary when she says that a government's "refusal to allow people the chance to organize in support of a cause larger than themselves, but separate from the state, represents an assault on one of our fundamental democratic values." And I agree with our President, who has said we will "call out those who suppress ideas and serve as a voice for those who are voiceless."

So how do we do this? The United States does not support political parties or advocacy groups or candidates. We support the right of individuals to exercise their fundamental freedoms of expression, association and assembly, and to attempt to peacefully bring change to their political systems. We do so with the conviction that an active and engaged citizenry is a pillar of free societies, and that history teaches that free societies are generally more peaceful, stable and prosperous.

We do so also with the conviction that civil society groups make democracies more sustainable, durable and responsive to their citizens, by creating the habits of trust and cooperation between citizens and the political institutions that should serve them.

At the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, engagement with civil society is woven through every aspect of what we do, and is a central focus in how we support diplomatic engagement by senior officials from Washington and at U.S. Embassies around the world. We have made it our mission to use all available mechanisms - diplomatic, policy and programmatic - to protect civil society, amplify its voice, and strengthen its on-the-ground capacity.

That means everywhere we go, we listen to civil society groups, just as we listen to the concerns of governments. Earlier this month, for example, our diplomats held a civil society dialogue in Tunis with a group of journalists, bloggers and advocates of media freedom from across the Middle East and North Africa, who were gathered for a UNESCO program on World Press Freedom Day. We heard the message, loud and clear, that the struggle for genuinely free expression is by no means over – it continues in various forms everywhere in the region.

Engagement with civil society also means that during our bilateral dialogues, including with China, Vietnam, Bahrain, and Russia, we reaffirm the U.S. Government's support for a freely functioning civil society. It means that as we prepare the annual country reports on human rights practices, we consult closely

with NGOs on the ground and in the US to gather and check our facts. And it means multilateral engagement, including through the United Nations, where we spearheaded the effort to establish a Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Assembly and Association. This administration has improved relations with a wide range of other nations and we work closely with like-minded countries on human rights issues.

We also support civil society through our programs. We aim to strengthen the longer-term capacity of civil society groups who wish to serve their societies as watchdogs, human rights advocates or independent and citizen journalists.
We also employ rapid response mechanisms to get assistance to those who need it in real time. We led the effort to establish a global assistance fund for embattled NGOs called the Lifeline: Embattled CSOs Assistance Fund, which now includes almost $5 million in contributions from 14 donor governments and one private foundation. We have developed other rapid response mechanisms that provide financial support to human rights defenders and CSOs working on LGBT and religious freedom issues. We also participate in a Community of Democracies' Working Group on Enabling and Protecting Civil Society, a government-NGO body that fosters collaboration among likeminded states and civil society organizations to counter regulatory threats to civil society worldwide.

While we have seen activists buffeted by headwinds in the current environment, we have also seen progress. In Cambodia, the international community mobilized to support committed activists on the ground that successfully thwarted legislation that, if implemented, would severely restrict that country's vital, independent civil society. In Burma, where I have visited twice in the last six months, I see a civil society movement coming out of the shadows, hungry for the chance to engage its government more openly and learn lessons from citizen groups around the world. In other countries, such as Indonesia and Chile, we have seen civil society and the government work towards building democratic institutions following the end of authoritarian regimes. Even in Yemen, which continues to be a challenging environment in almost every respect, we've seen the government withdraw draft legislation that would have unduly restricted NGOs.

Lastly, I am reminded that success and failures are neither permanent nor guaranteed; this work requires vigilance and tenacity. But I am greatly encouraged by the differences between today's environment and the one we faced 35 years ago, when DRL was created. Then, a Czech playwright wrote movingly about the power of the powerless, citing the example of a simple grocer who one day refuses to stop touting the party line and starts speaking his mind. Fifteen years later, that

playwright became president of a free country that continues to embrace the concept of civil society. And that grocer, Czech or Tunisian, faces a different world in 2012. Our job is to protect that voice and ensure others can hear it.

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear before the Commission today. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.