

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Briefing  
Human Rights: Taking Stock and Looking Forward  
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Acting President

Thank you Chairman McGovern, Chairman Pitts, and members of the Commission, for the opportunity to speak to you today about the closing space for civil society, political opposition, and independent media and to offer recommendations for protecting human rights around the world.

**Freedom in decline**

Respect for political and civil rights has declined for 10 straight years, as Freedom House has documented. This decline has occurred most sharply in the areas of free expression, rule of law, and freedom of association.

Authoritarian governments from Angola to Azerbaijan, Russia, and China have stepped up their repression, often in response to economic downturns. Cuts in government spending and reduced living standards have sparked public discontent, and authoritarian leaders have responded by cracking down harder on dissent.

Press freedom and internet freedom similarly are on a downward trajectory. Press freedom has declined to its lowest point in 12 years, as political and terrorist forces have sought to co-opt or silence the media in order to extend their power. Media have grown more partisan and polarized, while journalists increasingly suffer intimidation and physical violence.

Internet freedom around the world has deteriorated for the sixth consecutive year, by Freedom House's assessment, and two-thirds of all internet users now live in countries where criticism of the government, military, or ruling family is subject to censorship. Social media users face unprecedented penalties, and governments are increasingly going after messaging apps, particularly at times of unrest.

**Why support democracy now?**

U.S. support for human rights and democracy appears to have fallen out of favor but in fact is needed now more than ever.

Democratic countries usually are more reliable partners than authoritarian regimes, more stable, and more successful economically. They produce fewer terrorists and are less likely to provoke conflicts. The spread of democracy thus advances U.S. interests.

Authoritarian regimes may look strong, but they are in fact brittle. They are intensifying the repression of their people because they are vulnerable, as is evident from Ethiopia to Saudi Arabia and Venezuela, and repression often leads to more unrest. Governments that listen to their people are more stable than those that crack down, and gradual, peaceful democratic change serves U.S. interests far better than the violent collapse of authoritarian regimes.

Democratic values set the United States apart from authoritarian regimes, which are extending their power internationally. U.S. support for these values increases U.S. influence abroad, and does so at little cost. And when we fail to exert influence by promoting democratic values, we leave room for authoritarian regimes to advance their interests at our expense.

For example, censorship limits the access of American media companies to foreign markets; blocks on messaging apps harm American internet companies; and corruption and weak rule of law put U.S. businesses at a distinct disadvantage in relation to local competitors with political connections. Restrictions on non-governmental organizations affect human rights groups and business associations. In China, the recently passed foreign NGO management law prompted a remarkable letter last year from 45 American business groups across a range of sectors raising concern about the then-draft law's anticipated impact on commerce.

Protection of human rights isn't about imposing our values on others. Instead, it holds other governments to account when they fail to live up to their own laws and international commitments to respect the rights of their citizens.

## **How to promote human rights**

To defend and promote human rights around the world at this critical time, the U.S. Government should carry out the following actions:

1. **Fully enforce the *Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act***, which was included in this year's National Defense Authorization Act. This powerful new tool allows the President to block U.S. visas and freeze U.S.-based assets of human rights abusers and corrupt foreign officials. The individual sanctions bring some measure of accountability for these crimes and serve to deter future abuses. Members of Congress and civil society organizations can recommend names for sanction, and the President is required to report publicly who is on the sanctions list.

2. **Fund democracy, human rights, and governance (DRG) programs.** Support for democracy and human rights promotes U.S. interests, including security and economic growth, and thus is a prudent investment. As General David Petraeus has written, “Our security will be improved by sustaining foreign aid in the years ahead rather than by making further cuts.”<sup>1</sup> General James Mattis made the same point more bluntly. He said, “If you don’t fund the State Department fully, then I need to buy more guns.”<sup>2</sup>
3. **Advocate publicly for specific political prisoners and against specific abuses.** Activists look to Members of Congress and senior U.S. officials to speak out on their behalf and condemn human rights abuses when they occur. The international spotlight makes a difference. When U.S. officials remain silent about human rights while meeting with corrupt foreign leaders or human rights abusers, they embolden the abusers by suggesting the United States doesn’t care. When U.S. officials raise human rights concerns, their foreign counterparts usually take offense but also take note. Direct intervention by Members of Congress and senior U.S. officials has resulted in improved treatment for political prisoners, and even prisoner releases.

Protection of human rights contributes over time to more accountable governance and greater stability and advances both U.S. values and U.S. interests. It merits our continued support.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael O’Hanlon and David Petraeus, “Fund—don’t cut—U.S. soft power,” *Politico*, April 30, 2013, <http://www.politico.com/story/2013/04/david-petraeus-defense-diplomacy-soft-power-090781>

<sup>2</sup> Senate Armed Services Committee hearing, March 5, 2013, <http://www.usglc.org/budget-center/on-the-record/>