



## **Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing**

### **Threats to Civil Society Around the World**

**Tuesday, March 21, 2017**

**1:00 – 2:30 PM**

**2255 Rayburn House Office Building**

#### **Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery**

Good afternoon and welcome to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission hearing on “Threats to Civil Society around the World.” I would like to welcome our witnesses and thank them for taking the time to share their expertise and deep experience with us today. We appreciate your presence.

Mr. Kiai, let me also take this opportunity to thank you for your two terms of service as United Nations Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association. Many, many people the world over have been helped by your work and are very grateful for your efforts.

Both as the Commission and as Members of Congress committed to human rights, we know the critical role played by civil society organizations and movements, their leaders and their members, in the promotion and protection of human rights around the world. They are the lifeblood of the human rights movement. They play a critical role in pressuring governments to fulfill their human rights obligations, in naming and shaming human rights abusers. Civil society groups are also key actors in the education, solidarity and advocacy of a broad range of critical issues inside their nations.

Just as the work of civil society contributes to the recognition and fulfillment of human rights, so too does civil society depend on the realization of human rights, in particular, the fundamental rights to peaceful assembly and association, freedom of expression, and the right to life, liberty and the security of the person.

Since 1948, human rights have been recognized as universal, regardless of government or ideology. We are also aware that the ability of citizens to exercise and enjoy their basic human rights often advances the process of democratization. When basic human rights are infringed, the health of civil society is threatened. And when the health of civil society is threatened, all forms of good governance are threatened.

Since the 1970s, the world has witnessed a wave of democratic transitions that have been accompanied by explosive growth in the number of civil society organizations covering a broad scope of topics and concerns.

But in recent years, we have seen a backlash. Human rights defenders and civil society organizations increasingly face hostile and threatening environments. In 2014 alone, CIVICUS, an international association of civil society groups, counted “significant attacks on the fundamental civil society rights of free association, free assembly and free expression in 96 countries.”

As we will hear today, the specifics of these attacks vary, but there are common trends. Many countries now have laws that “close the space” for civil society by imposing expensive, arbitrary or impossibly complex registration requirements, or which limit NGOs from receiving foreign funding or grants. Since 2012, governments around the world have enacted 194 laws affecting civil society, of which 65% were restrictive.

In other countries, the threats are often against the integrity, lives or security of organizations, defenders, their colleagues and even their families. Civil society organizers and human rights defenders have been defamed as terrorists and traitors, subjected to judicial harassment or falsely imprisoned, or become the victims of physical threats, reprisals and assassinations.

Speaking personally, far too many of the human rights defenders and activists I’ve had the honor and privilege to know over the years have been murdered – very brave people like the Salvadoran Jesuit priests Ignacio Ellacuría, Segundo Montes and Ignacio Martín Baró; Russian democracy advocate Boris Nemtsov; and Honduran land activist and indigenous leader Berta Cáceres. Most of the time, those responsible for their deaths benefit from entrenched impunity. Even as we meet today, thousands of human rights defenders and civil society leaders bravely carry out their daily work under the threat of death.

The Obama Administration recognized the global crackdown on civil society, and took some measures to combat it, such as the *Stand with Civil Society* initiative, a global call to action to support, defend, and sustain civil society groups worldwide. It made a point of working with and consulting civil society groups, and opposed undue restrictions on civil society and fundamental freedoms. Whatever the criticisms of these efforts – and there were certainly criticisms – they reflected the long-standing U.S. belief that supporting civil society also supports and advances human rights and democracy.

I am hopeful that Secretary of State Rex Tillerson will also stand with civil society and continue this initiative. While we have yet to hear the Trump Administration's proposals in this area – and the budget announced last week is not encouraging – I am also hopeful that this initiative will continue to receive bipartisan support here in Congress.

So this hearing is very timely in shining a light on why Congress and the Trump Administration should continue to support and advocate for a strong and healthy civil society in every nation.

Today we will hear from a number of experts about the causes and consequences of the serious threats confronting civil society around the world. I look forward to hearing their recommendations and their suggestions on what actions the U.S. Congress should take that might help advance civil society; and those that might contribute to reversing some of the trends adversely affecting civil society globally and in particular countries.