



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing

Human Rights in Egypt

Tuesday, November 3, 2015

1:30 – 3:00 PM

2360 Rayburn House Office Building

Opening Remarks

Good afternoon. Welcome and thank you for joining us this afternoon for our hearing on Human Rights in Egypt.

I would like to recognize my fellow co-chair Congressman Joe Pitts, and Congressman Keith Ellison, a member of the Executive Committee of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, and thank them for their long-standing leadership on behalf of human rights and religious freedom around the world. I also want to thank the expert witnesses who are taking time from their schedules to provide us with up-to-date information on Egypt's very worrisome human rights climate. I thank you all for the work you do, for your untiring commitment and for the passion with which you defend human rights in Egypt.

It's been almost five years since Hosni Mubarak resigned the presidency of Egypt, initiating Egypt's Arab Spring. As the demonstrations that forced him out got underway, then Commission Co-Chair Frank Wolf and I wrote to President Obama urging him to emphasize both privately and in public statements that any transition should be peaceful and democratic and ensure that human rights and religious freedom were protected. We wanted to make sure that the rapidly evolving situation would not be exploited by extremist elements.

Today I regret to say that we were right to be concerned, but perhaps wrong about where the worst threats to a fragile democratic process would come from. Mohammed Morsi, who won Egypt's first-ever contested presidential election in July 2012, was ousted in a coup a year later. Months before he was removed from office, he was accused of favoring his political base, the

Muslim Brotherhood, and he faced serious opposition for his handling of a new constitution and his use of decree powers. He brought out the armed forces to control unrest in the streets. So there's no question that his time in office was tumultuous.

But the way to remove unpopular democratically-elected leaders is by defeating them in the next election. Instead, Egypt's army suspended the constitution and imposed an interim government, which ended up lasting almost as long as Morsi's – until the June 2014 election of President Abdel Fatah al-Sisi, in an environment that observers including the U.S. government termed “restrictive.”

Although formally a republic, Egypt under Al-Sisi looks a lot like it did under Mubarak. Al-Sisi has sought to crush the opposition – the Muslim Brotherhood is outlawed, many of its leaders are imprisoned, its political party has been dissolved by court order and it has been formally designated as a terrorist organization. In a period of eight months, more than 40,000 people were detained, charged or sentenced because of their alleged association with the Muslim Brotherhood.

What have been the consequences of the return to military rule? As we will hear today, the human rights situation has deteriorated dramatically. Documented abuses include unlawful killings, torture, suppression of civil liberties, and lack of due process. People have been forcibly disappeared; others are dying in prison; others are banned from travel. A record number of journalists are behind bars. The situation is truly awful – so awful, in fact, that many observers believe that the government's actions are fueling anti-government militancy and terrorism. In the name of fighting extremism, people are being radicalized.

This is a phenomenon that we are seeing all over the Middle East: repressive, discriminatory states are creating the conditions that lead to extremism – and then those same states come to the United States looking for more military aid to combat the extremists. Last August, during the U.S-Egypt “strategic dialogue,” Sec. Kerry expressed concern that Egypt's crackdown could be fueling violence. Yet the Administration has continued to provide U.S. military assistance to Egypt, to the tune of \$1.3 billion a year, bypassing certification requirements included in the FY2014 and 2015 appropriations acts in the name of national security. How do we break this cycle?

Today, we are privileged to hear from individuals who have profound knowledge of the human rights climate in Egypt. I look forward to hearing your testimony, and I especially look forward to your recommendations to Congress.