

**Dr. Tomicah Tillemann**  
**Senior Advisor to the Secretary for Civil Society and Emerging Democracies**  
**“Civil Society: Championing Change in a Changing World”**  
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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Commission, I want to thank you for the opportunity to testify today. If you will forgive a moment of personal privilege, my late grandfather, Tom Lantos, did not know that this body would be created before he passed away. But I am confident that few things would have pleased him more than seeing this Commission carry on his commitment to the cause of human rights. And in the context of today’s topic, I should also note that my grandfather understood the indispensable role of civil society in defending human rights, and he would have applauded the focus of this hearing. So, I would like to thank you for the work you are performing.

We are coming together this afternoon at a moment of profound change. The world is witnessing a fundamental renegotiation of the power relationships that have historically defined interactions between citizens and governments. Advances in technology and shifts in culture are providing individuals with access to new sources of information and new tools for activism. As a result, citizens’ expectations for governments and governance are shifting.

Civil society has been at the forefront of this phenomenon. And over the last year, the geopolitical earthquakes that have shaken North Africa, the Middle East and other regions have provided strong evidence of this ongoing change.

Social networking sites, micro blogs, and mobile phones are making it easier and cheaper than ever before for people to hold governments accountable and advance the common good. As this occurs, civil society groups are emerging as powerful catalysts for global change.

Now, it should not come as a surprise that many governments confronting these dynamics are pushing back aggressively against civil society organizations and their demands for increased government accountability. Over the last several years, more than 50 governments have either introduced or considered legislation that imposed constraints on the work of civil society organizations or limited their ability to receive funding.

These regulations take many different forms, but a few examples illustrate the severity and absurdity of the rules confronting civic groups:

- In Eritrea, CSOs engaged in relief work are required to have access to one million U.S. dollars – more than 20,000 times the monthly per capita GDP.
- In Belarus, it is virtually impossible to register a new civil society organization, and operating an unregistered group is a criminal offense.
- And in Venezuela, recipients of funding from the United States have been labeled “enemies of the revolution” and warned that they face imprisonment or “popular justice” – a significant threat in Caracas, which has one of the highest murder rates in the world.

These and other regulatory threats constitute a clear and present danger to the work of civil society. And Assistant Secretary Posner will discuss how we are acting through a variety of mechanisms to address these challenges.

At the same time, we are working to reaffirm the centrality of civil society in our own diplomacy. Last February, Secretary Clinton launched a new Strategic Dialogue with Civil Society. This initiative, modeled on our dialogues with key bilateral partners, is designed to elevate our engagement with civil society alongside our work with governments.

Over the last year, senior Department officials – including Assistant Secretary Posner – have come together with civil society representatives under the auspices of the Dialogue to address issues including democracy and human rights, religion in foreign policy, governance and accountability, empowering women, and labor issues. Civil society working groups on these issues have developed concrete policy recommendations. And yesterday, at the launch of the Strategic Dialogue’s 2012 Summit, Secretary Clinton announced action on the first eight of these recommendations before a worldwide audience of civil society representatives. More details on these recommendations are available on the State Department’s website, but I will mention a few of the highlights:

- We will be providing more extensive, systematic training for State Department personnel on how to engage religious communities and protect religious freedom. This training will be offered both at the Foreign Service Institute and online. And it will facilitate our diplomatic outreach to faith communities around the world;

- We will be expanding our efforts to encourage countries undergoing political transitions to enshrine equal citizenship for all in their new constitutions. As part of this work, we will be launching new Arabic-language information efforts to support full and equal rights for women.
- We will be coming together with other partners to institutionalize a platform for dialogue with representatives from labor and business groups at G-20 Summits;
- We will be developing new opportunities for south-south cooperation on labor issues; and
- Beginning with posts in Astana, Brasilia, Dhaka, Erbil, Jakarta, Lusaka, New Delhi, Prague, Rabat and Yaoundé, we will be establishing mission-based civil society working groups within the Dialogue to address issues of local and regional importance.

Our Strategic Dialogue with Civil Society already involves more than 50 bureaus and offices at the State Department and USAID. It is providing us with a platform for translating the insights of civil society into our foreign policy. And we are looking forward to expanding this important initiative.

We are also increasing our engagement with the Community of Democracies and other international bodies that provide frameworks for multilateral cooperation with civil society. Within the Community of Democracies, we and other likeminded governments are now working alongside civil society in task forces to strengthen new democracies in Moldova and Tunisia and tackle a range of other challenges. These efforts are providing a model for countries around the world of how government and civil society can come together to deliver results for the citizens we serve.

We know this work will not be easy. And we recognize that, while there have been pockets of excellence on these issues, in many respects, this is uncharted terrain. By comparison, government-to-government diplomacy has been around for a very long time, we are still developing tools to collaborate with civil society. But as we survey the vital contributions civil society has made to expanding human rights and opportunity in our own country, it is easy to see why this work is so important.

So, let me conclude where I began: we are living through a moment of profound change in the role of civil society in nations around the world. We realize that some governments are working to prevent this change. But at the State Department, we are working to embrace it. And we look forward to working with you to support civil society as an integral element of democracy and an essential guardian of human rights.