

Remarks by the President at Clinton Global Initiative

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2:12 P.M. EDT

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The point is this started in civil society. That's what prompted action by President Clinton and by myself. And promoting civil society that can surface issues and push leadership is not just in keeping with our values, it's not charity. It's in our national interests. Countries that respect human rights — including freedom of association -- happen to be our closest partners. That is not an accident. Conversely, when these rights are suppressed, it fuels grievances and a sense of injustice that over time can fuel instability or extremism. So I believe America's support for civil society is a matter of national security.

It is precisely because citizens and civil society can be so powerful — their ability to harness technology and connect and mobilize at this moment so unprecedented — that more and more governments are doing everything in their power to silence them.

From Russia to China to Venezuela, you are seeing relentless crackdowns, vilifying legitimate dissent as subversive. In places like Azerbaijan, laws make it incredibly difficult for NGOs even to operate. From Hungary to Egypt, endless regulations and overt intimidation increasingly target civil society. And around the world, brave men and women who dare raise their voices are harassed and attacked and even killed.

So today, we honor those who have given their lives. Among them, in Cameroon, Eric Lembembe; in Libya, Salwa Bugaighis; in Cambodia, Chut Wutty; in Russia, Natalia Estemirova. We stand in solidarity with those who are detained at this very moment. *In Venezuela, Leopoldo Lopez*; in Burundi, Pierre-Claver Mbonimpa; in Egypt, Ahmed Maher; in China, Liu Xiaobo; and now Ilham Tohti; in Vietnam, Father Ly. And so many others. They deserve to be free. They ought to be released.

This growing crackdown on civil society is a campaign to undermine the very idea of democracy. And what's needed is an even stronger campaign to defend democracy.

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*For a transcript of the full remarks, visit: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/23/remarks-president-clinton-global-initiative>