

Opening Statement of the Honorable Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL)
House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa
Hearing on “American NGOs Under Attack in Morsi’s Egypt”
June 12, 2013

Over two years ago the improbable happened. Millions of Egyptians filled Tahrir Square and streets all across Egypt demanding the end of the Hosni Mubarak regime and ushering in a new, democratic era; an era that would be free of government corruption and free of police brutality and an era that would allow all Egyptians to exercise their freedoms of speech, expression, assembly and religion. But as we all know, the transition to true democracy is often an arduous task that takes time and commitment, and it must be responsive to the goals and aspirations of those who facilitated the change.

The Egyptian transitional government’s treatment of pro-democracy groups – like Freedom House, IRI and NDI – and groups that promote free independent press like ICFJ, was in direct contradiction with the principles of democracy and incongruous with the goals of the revolution. It is clear by last week’s verdict, Morsi’s refusal to drop the charges and the new NGO law that the freedom of these groups to work will only be further restricted under the Muslim Brotherhood-led government.

These institutions and their employees all believed in the cause of freedom and democracy – they believed in the aspirations of millions of Egyptians who wished to cast off the oppressive yolk of totalitarianism and establish a free and open society. But the Egyptian government feared that the people might soon turn against the government in the people’s pursuit to end corruption and bring real democratic reforms. So the Egyptian authorities ransacked the offices of these NGOs, arrested their employees, seized their assets, and shut down their operations.

It was hoped that the Egyptian officials would soon see the error of their ways and drop the charges and allow the NGOs to continue their work. However, last week all 43 defendants were convicted and sentenced in a case that had no basis in the rule of law.

This verdict was politically driven and not just an attack on these American NGOs, the German NGO Konrad Adenauer Foundation or their employees – who come from countries like the USA, Germany, Serbia, Norway, Lebanon, Romania and many other places. This verdict was an indictment on the Morsi regime’s assault on freedom, on human rights, on democracy and on the Egyptian people themselves.

We must stand in solidarity with those who continue to seek the ideals of the revolution. It is no longer acceptable to send unconditional aid to a regime that persecutes, prosecutes and convicts those who seek to aid Egyptians seeking freedom and true democracy for all of Egypt.

To seek further reforms I have introduced H.R. 416 – the Egypt Accountability and Democracy Promotion Act. This bill would condition our economic assistance to Egypt in order to advance U.S. national security interests by ensuring that Egypt protects freedom and protects human rights, the rule of law, civil society organizations, and upholds the 1979 Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty.

Because if we don't condition our aid, we risk sending the wrong message – yet again – to countries in the region and around the world that the United States will not only tolerate this unabashed attack on democratic values, but we will not hold these violators accountable for their repressive actions.

When I was Chairman of the full Foreign Affairs Committee, the Administration wanted to send over \$500 million in American taxpayer money to Morsi. I placed a hold on this because of the repressive actions of the Muslim Brotherhood-led government and because of its crackdown on civil society and the rule of law. And I was disappointed to hear Secretary Kerry announce earlier this year in Cairo that the United States would provide an additional \$250 million in assistance to Morsi in Economic Support Funds.

We cannot afford to send a mixed message at this delicate juncture. We must send a strong, unified signal if we are to see Egypt realize the goals of the revolution. The United States must call on Morsi to immediately pardon all 43 individuals and allow the NGOs to reopen without further harassment from government authorities.

We must also impress upon him the importance of abandoning his proposed NGO law that would restrict the operations of NGO groups across Egypt even further, allowing for the possibility of even more of these sham trials to occur. And we must insist that the Muslim Brotherhood-led government implement real democratic reforms, or risk losing U.S. assistance.

The choice is clear.