

**Foreign Affairs Committee,
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations
United States House of Representatives**

**Statement of Séverine Autesserre
Professor of Political Science, Barnard College, Columbia University**

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“Resolving the Political Crisis in the Democratic Republic of the Congo”

Thank you, Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Bass, and Members of the Subcommittee, for holding this hearing. I appreciate the opportunity to share with you my analysis and recommendations concerning the Democratic Republic of Congo.

My name is Séverine Autesserre. I am a Professor of Political Science at Barnard College, Columbia University, and an Andrew Carnegie Fellow. I have lived and worked on and off in Congo for 16 years, and I have published two books—*Peaceland* and *The Trouble with the Congo*—which both talk about war, peace, and intervention in Congo. I have also written about Congo for *The New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, and numerous scholarly journals. My research is freely accessible on my website www.severineautesserre.com. All of my publications—and this statement—reflect my best judgment as an independent author and researcher who strives to be a friend to Congolese people from all sides of the political spectrum rather than as an advocate for a specific party, group, organization, constituency, or policy.¹

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Over the past two years, as Congo has descended into a political crisis, the United States government—along with journalists, activists, foreign diplomats, and the leaders of international and nongovernmental organizations—have focused mostly on the drama surrounding President Joseph Kabila’s attempts to cling to power by delaying elections.

This narrow political focus recalls the outside world’s approach to Congo the last times the country prepared for general elections, in 2006 and 2011. Now, as then, the preoccupation with elections distracts from the issues whose resolutions are more likely to lead to peace: the poverty, unemployment, corruption, criminality, and poor access to land, justice, and education that are at the root of Congo’s long-standing violence.

In this statement, I explain that elections and legitimacy are important, but to concentrate exclusively on the political crisis in Kinshasa is to waste the opportunity to tackle other,

¹ A preliminary version of the argument I develop in this statement appeared earlier this year in *Foreign Affairs*, in two pieces entitled *What the Uproar Over Congo’s Elections Misses* (March 2017) and *The Right Way to Build Peace in Congo* (April 2017). I am grateful to the *Foreign Affairs* team, in particular Simon Engler, for working with me on these articles and allowing me to use them as a departure point for my statement. I also thank Graham Glusman, René Lemarchand, and Philippe Rosen for their very useful feedback on this statement. Of course, *Foreign Affairs*, Simon Engler, Graham Glusman, René Lemarchand, and Philippe Rosen do not necessarily endorse or agree with my position.

more pressing issues. This approach is all the more misguided because the ongoing violence makes it much more difficult to resolve the political crisis, and because poverty, land tensions, corrupt justice, and a lack of access to education are among the very issues that fuel this violence.

There are actions that Congress can take to help resolve the ongoing crisis in Congo. Congress should acknowledge that local conflicts are an essential cause of violence and that democracy and peace do not necessarily arrive together. I also recommend legislation that increases the United States' support to local and bottom-up peacebuilding and places local actors in the drivers' seat.

THE CURRENT SITUATION

Political Crisis in Kinshasa

General elections were scheduled to take place in 2016, and free and fair elections are relatively new to Congo. In 2006, the country held its first democratic elections since 1960, in a contest that led to a runoff vote and violence in Kinshasa. Congolese citizens voted again in 2011, but many fraud accusations marred the process. Both times, President Joseph Kabila and his party took the majority of the votes.

The next round of general elections could have been different. To start, the constitution bars Kabila from running for a third term. More importantly, Congolese people have been so disappointed with the performance of their president that, according to one of the only reliable opinion polls available, they were preparing to vote for political opponents.²

But the elections have yet to take place. The government has rescheduled them several times under various pretexts, and it now appears that the voting won't happen until December 2018. Kabila's attempts to stay in power have generated massive popular protests over the past year, all of which the government violently repressed.

The Kabila government has harassed, threatened, and, at times, arrested, tortured, and killed opposition figures and grassroots activists in order to suppress resistance. Ordinary people have become wary of discussing elections. During my latest trips to Congo in 2016 and 2017, most of my contacts would lower their voices when talking about the political crisis. Others would first look around to make sure nobody was listening.

Even if political change in Kinshasa were to arrive, however, it would be unlikely to bring peace and prosperity to Congo. The capital is too disconnected from the rest of the country to effectively address its problems, even if it wanted to. Besides, holding general elections will not resolve the many issues that cause misery for the country's citizens.

Continuing Violence

² Congo Research Group and Bureau d'Études de Recherches et de Consulting International, *Impasse in the Congo: What Do the People Think? Results from a National Public Opinion Poll*, New York, NY: New York University, 2016.

The Congolese conflict is the deadliest conflict since World War II. It has claimed more than five million lives.³

Most of the continuing violence in Congo is not caused by the delay in holding elections or the struggle for power in Kinshasa. The analysis that I developed during the war, and that culminated in my 2010 book, *The Trouble with the Congo*, continues to be proven accurate and still holds up today.⁴ In short, local, provincial, national, regional, and international issues combine to produce conflicts over power, land, economic resources, and social standing, causing violence throughout the country.

While electoral matters and the crisis in national politics clearly fuel some of the ongoing fighting—for instance, the clashes in Kinshasa and Bas Congo earlier this year—local issues, such as access to land and to local power, also motivate large parts of the persistent conflicts in Congo’s eastern and central provinces. Those conflicts have been exacerbated by rebel groups from Congo’s neighbors, notably Burundi, Rwanda, and Uganda. These combatants have taken refuge in Congo and have often allied with the national army, or with Congolese militias, to control territory, fend off enemies, and wage war on their home countries. All of these local, national, and regional groups illegally exploit Congo’s massive natural resources like charcoal, diamonds, and gold to help fund their operations.

The current political crisis has the potential to exacerbate all of these issues. For good reason, Congolese citizens worry that the run-up to elections may generate additional violence, for instance between protesters and the police or the army. The countdown to elections is also likely to worsen community tensions, because politicians are mobilizing their bases by promising them land, money, jobs, and the like, pitting them against their opponents’ supporters.

At the same time, omnipresent fighting impedes the resolution of the political crisis in Kinshasa. In the midst of widespread violence, there can be no meaningful freedoms of expression or movement, nor can there be many of the other conditions that free and fair elections require. And when there are criminals and rebels on whom governing elites can blame disappearances and murders, it is easier for the ruling class to oppress its opponents.

Vicious Cycle

Not surprisingly, according to surveys run by the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, Congolese people consistently rank peace and security as their top priorities.⁵ Also of

³ International Rescue Committee, *Mortality in the Democratic Republic of Congo: An Ongoing Crisis*, New York, NY: IRC and Burnet Institute, 2008.

⁴ See, among other publications, Séverine Autesserre, “Local Violence, National Peace? Post-War ‘Settlement’ in the Eastern D.R. Congo (2003-2006),” *African Studies Review*, vol. 49, no. 3, 2006; “The Trouble with Congo: How Local Disputes Fuel Regional Violence,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 87, no. 3, 2008; and *The Trouble with the Congo: Local Violence and the Failure of International Peacebuilding*, New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

⁵ Patrick Vinck, Phuong Pham, and Tino Kreutzer, *Poll Reports*, Boston, MA: Harvard Humanitarian initiative, 2008 to 2016, available at www.peacebuildingdata.org/research/drc.

great concern to these citizens are a dearth of money and employment; a lack of access to education, food, and land; and governance issues, most notably corruption and injustice.

Congo is the 12th least-developed country in the world. Concretely, this means that 77% of Congolese citizens live on less than \$2 per day; life expectancy is less than 60 years; more than 42% of children under the age of five suffer from malnutrition; less than 25% of Congolese people go further than primary school in their studies, and 66.8% of Congolese women have experienced gender-based violence.⁶

Security issues, economic problems, and social concerns are inextricably linked. Consider poverty. On the island of Idjwi in Lake Kivu, which has been mostly insulated from the violence of the surrounding province of South Kivu, young people I met while conducting academic research in 2016 threatened to take up arms against local elites in an attempt to attract international attention, and thus income-generating projects, to their island. In the nearby town of Kavumu, on South Kivu's mainland, Congolese I spoke with told me they wanted access to development programs that would employ young people and keep them from joining armed groups. Likewise, many of the militia members I have talked to over the past 16 years emphasized the very practical concerns that led them to enroll: They had no better job prospects and needed to find a way to eat and survive—not to mention that they now had some respect and power. And of course, violence prevents many development initiatives from succeeding or even starting in the first place, thus creating a vicious cycle.

In addition, the Congolese state is so weak that it is barely present outside of the main cities. This means no schools, no health centers, no reliable police and army, and no roads, except when a foreign donor or association has decided to help out. In fact, 73% of Congolese people actively distrust their government.⁷ They also often associate soldiers and police officers with abuse, not protection. Indeed, statistics from the United Nations Joint Human Rights office show that Congolese law and order forces are responsible for even more rapes, killings, and thefts than the rebels and militiamen they combat.⁸

The best way to resolve these matters would be to install a national government that represents Congolese citizens and focuses on peace and development. But the negotiations in Kinshasa and the elections they may eventually produce are unlikely to lead to that outcome. There is little hope that elections, if they are held, will be free and fair. Moreover, the overwhelming majority of the elite jockeying for power place their own wealth and influence above the interests of their fellow citizens.

Politicians and researchers often emphasize how deeply intractable the conflict is: Even the largest and most expensive United Nations peacekeeping mission in the world, with its \$1-billion-a-year budget and more than 20,000 troops, has failed to end violence.

⁶ United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 2016: Human Development for Everyone*, New York, NY: UNDP, 2017.

⁷ United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 2016*.

⁸ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Accountability for Human Rights Violations and Abuses in the DRC: Achievements, Challenges and Way Forward (1 January 2014 - 31 March 2016)*, New York, NY: OHCHR and MONUSCO, 2016, p. IV.

Hope

But not all hope is lost in Congo. Many individuals strive for peace and manage to make a difference.

I have seen many heartening developments in the past sixteen years. The overall situation is far better today than the first time I went to Congo in 2001. The country is not divided between government and rebel areas any more. Many provinces are free from war. Ordinary citizens have managed to build a wide democratic movement starting from the grassroots. Activists work hard to try to hold their government accountable; so far, neither threats, torture, jailing, nor killings have managed to stop them. As I detailed in a recent piece for the *Washington Post*, in some parts of Congo, citizens have even found a way to address violence on their own—for example, by turning to local religious authorities or community organizations to mediate disputes, instead of to militias or the security forces.⁹

The good news is that it is possible to promote peace and prosperity in Congo despite the country's political crisis. Below I describe the actions Congress can take.

THE WAY FORWARD

Change the Overall Approach And Focus on What Works

In my book, *Peaceland*, I demonstrate that the United States, along with most activists, diplomats, peacebuilders, and development workers, usually tries to address tensions in war and postwar contexts through projects, aid, etc.—in short, resources that come from the outside.¹⁰ Very few focus on tapping into and unleashing the talent and potential that the Congolese and others throughout the world's conflict zones possess. When they do, they support national elites, and they try to build peace from the top down. This approach has repeatedly failed in Congo and at times, has even worsened the situation.¹¹

It seems obvious that building on what works is as important as learning from what fails. And yet, until now that hasn't been the case. If the United States, along with international and nongovernmental organizations, wants to help Congo resolve its ongoing issues, it should focus on backing successful peacebuilding initiatives rather than concentrating almost exclusively on challenges such as troubled elections. Foreign interveners should fund, protect, and otherwise support exceptional individuals and organizations much more extensively.

⁹ Séverine Autesserre, "Here's What Congo Can Teach the World About Peace," *The Washington Post*, October 19, 2016.

¹⁰ Séverine Autesserre, *Peaceland: Conflict Resolution and the Everyday Politics of International Intervention*, New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

¹¹ See most of my published work on Congo, including my 2006 article "Local Violence, National Peace?", my 2010 book *The Trouble with the Congo*, as well as "Hobbes and the Congo: Frames, Local Violence, and International Intervention," *International Organization*, vol. 63, no. 2, 2009, "The Only Way to Help Congo," *The New York Times*, June 23, 2012, and "Dangerous Tales: Dominant Narratives on the Congo and Their Unintended Consequences," *African Affairs*, vol. 111, no. 443, 2012.

For this support to be effective, we need a change of mentality and approach. I have detailed the required changes at length in the conclusions to my books *Peaceland* and *The Trouble with the Congo*, as well as in a recent article for the *International Studies Review*, and I provide a short summary of the essential points below. I show that the United States needs to adopt the following three measures:

1. Acknowledge that democracy and peace do not necessarily arrive together
2. Put local actors in the driver's seat
3. Increase its support to local and bottom-up peacebuilding

Acknowledge that Democracy and Peace Do Not Necessarily Arrive Together

A first and essential step is to recognize that good outcomes such as democracy and peace do not always arrive together.¹² In fact, as numerous political scientists have demonstrated, the push toward political liberalization has fueled violence in a number of other postwar countries, from Angola and Bosnia to Cambodia and El Salvador.¹³

In the short term, there may be a similar tradeoff between democracy and peace in Congo. Elections could be organized as quickly as possible, with the understanding that doing so may fuel violence. Alternatively, the time, resources, and effort required to organize elections could be used to address the root causes of Congo's conflict.

Foreign activists and diplomats should not be the ones to choose between these courses. Instead, ordinary Congolese should. Diplomats, peacekeepers, and the staff members of international and nongovernmental organizations can certainly help. But to do so, they must let local stakeholders design and lead the democratization or peacebuilding process.

Put Local Actors in the Driver's Seat

Congress should instruct United States agencies to invert the prevailing practice of foreigners making decisions while local people merely assist or execute orders. Local actors—whether these actors are local non-governmental organizations, local authorities, civil-society representatives, religious structures, or local staff and counterparts—should be in the driver's seat, getting to do things themselves and acting as the primary decision makers. It is foreigners who should remain in the shadows to help and advise.

Ordinary citizens trust local-level elites much more than they trust national leaders, even when these local chiefs (like traditional authorities) were not chosen democratically. Moreover, local people have far more relevant knowledge, contacts, and means to resolve their own predicaments than outsiders usually believe they do, and more than provincial, national, and international actors will ever have. In spite of conventional thinking, local

¹² For more on this topic, see Séverine Autesserre, "International Peacebuilding and Local Success: Assumptions and Effectiveness," *International Studies Review*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2017, and "Three Flawed Ideas Are Hurting International Peacebuilding," *The Washington Post* online, March 2017.

¹³ Among others, see Michael N. Barnett, "Building a Republican Peace: Stabilizing States after War," *International Security*, vol. 30, no. 4, 2006; and Roland Paris, *At War's End: Building Peace after Civil Conflict*, New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

actors do have the capacity to address some of the deeper roots of their country's problems—indeed, enough to have made real progress in recent years. They have managed to create islands of peace in North and South Kivu, ease tensions between antagonistic communities in Ituri, and build a popular democratic movement.

International interveners like United States agencies, the United Nations, and many international and non-governmental organizations tend to ignore such local initiatives. Instead, they must support and reinforce the local efforts.

Their main role should be to empower the local population, authorities, and organizations to decide which tensions and priorities to address, which actions would be most effective, which partners are reliable, and how international actors can best support their efforts. United States diplomats deployed on the ground, as well as non-governmental and international organizations staff funded by the United States, would have two main responsibilities in this process: first, to identify reliable peacebuilders, monitor their actions, and provide any technical support necessary, and second, to channel funds and logistical resources to the actors identified. The work of the non-governmental organization the Life and Peace Institute in eastern Congo is a perfect example of this approach, and the results achieved so far demonstrate its feasibility and effectiveness.

Increase the Support to Bottom-Up Peacebuilding

Next, United States legislators and policy-implementers should acknowledge that bottom-up processes can be at least as effective at creating peace as top-down approaches are, if not more so. Building peace, democracy, and prosperity from the grassroots is a necessary complement to the ongoing efforts to resolve the crisis in Kinshasa.

❖ *The Importance of Bottom-Up Peacebuilding*

Two problematic assumptions shape the overall intervention in Congo and in many other conflict zones: first, that local tensions mirror national and regional ones, and second, that peace achieved on the national or international stage tends to trickle down to the local sphere.¹⁴ In fact, many scholars have demonstrated that local and subnational conflicts are often distinct from national and international ones, even if they are linked to them.¹⁵ What is more, many other researchers have shown that establishing peace at the national or international level does not necessarily end local violence.¹⁶

¹⁴ Séverine Autesserre, "Going Micro: Emerging and Future Peacebuilding Research," *International Peacekeeping*, vol. 21, no. 4, 2014.

¹⁵ Among others, see Patricia Justino, Tilman Brück, and Philip Verwimp, eds., *A Micro-Level Perspective on the Dynamics of Conflict, Violence, and Development*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, and Stathis Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

¹⁶ Among others, see Christopher R. Mitchell and Landon E. Hancock, eds., *Local Peacebuilding and National Peace: Interaction between Grassroots and Elite Processes*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012; and Roger Mac Ginty, *No War, No Peace: The Rejuvenation of Stalled Peace Processes and Peace Accords*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

Congo is no exception. Just as national actors manipulate local armed groups, so too do local actors use national conflicts to pursue their own specific agendas.¹⁷ Villagers in North and South Kivu, for example, regularly ally with national leaders and foreign militias to get control over land.

The massive national and international peace efforts of the past 20 years have mostly focused on assuaging violence from the top down—by focusing on general elections, organizing large international conferences to reconcile presidents and rebel leaders, and so on. This approach has clearly failed to end the violence.

Extensive scholarly and policy research proves that bottom-up peace approaches have increased peacebuilding effectiveness in various conflict zones.¹⁸ They have even contributed to prosperity and stability (including strong state institutions) in parts of Somalia, Afghanistan, and Iraq.¹⁹ Overall, the conclusions drawn from the research are definitive: Only a combination of bottom-up and top-down efforts can build sustainable peace.²⁰ It is high time that foreign interveners apply these lessons in Congo.

❖ *The Need for Both Top-Down and Bottom-Up Approaches*

Of course, civilians cannot defeat armed groups single-handedly. Nor do ordinary people have the networks necessary to build peace at the national level. This is why international pressure on national and regional actors remains necessary.

What Congo needs is bottom-up peacebuilding **in addition to** the current top-down approach. Congress should not mandate U.S. diplomats to end their current focus on Kinshasa but supplement it with more local peacebuilding efforts.

To be clear: I do not deny the importance of peacebuilding at the national level. My argument is not that top-down conflict resolution does not matter and that locally-driven peacebuilding is the only answer. Just as a purely top-down intervention leads to unsustainable peace, an exclusively bottom-up strategy would only produce a very fragile and temporary settlement because top-down manipulation can jeopardize peace achieved at the local level.

¹⁷ See most of my published work on Congo, as well as Pool d'Appui à la Stabilisation des Experts de la Société Civile Congolaise, *Analyses Croisées de Conflits à l'Est de la République Démocratique Du Congo*, Goma: Pole Institute and MONUSCO, 2017.

¹⁸ See for instance Kate McGuinness, *Local First: Development for the Twenty-First Century*, London: Peace Direct, 2012; and Hanna Leonardsson and Gustav Rudd, "The 'Local Turn' in Peacebuilding: A Literature Review of Effective and Emancipatory Local Peacebuilding," *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 36, no. 5, 2015.

¹⁹ Michael Harsh, "A Better Approach to Statebuilding: Lessons from 'Islands of Stability'," *Foreign Affairs* online, 2017.

²⁰ Among others, see Mary Anderson and Marshall Wallace, *Opting out of War: Strategies to Prevent Violent Conflict*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2013; John Paul Lederach, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*, Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1997; and Craig Zelizer and Robert A. Rubinstein, *Building Peace: Practical Reflections from the Field*, Sterling, VA: Kumarian Press, 2009.

Rather, my argument is that there are many causes of violence beyond the political crisis in Kinshasa and, as such, the focus on elections as the main solution to the Congo's troubles is misguided and the hope placed in national elites is overly optimistic. It is simplistic to assume that elites in Kinshasa control everything. Elections do not guarantee institution building. Bottom-up conflicts, if left unresolved, can annihilate successes achieved at the macro-level, as has happened multiple times in the past two decades. And given the current circumstances, ending the struggle for power in the capital is unlikely to automatically address the problems at the roots of Congo's violence: poverty, unemployment, corruption, criminality, and poor access to land, justice, and education.

❖ *Concrete Ways to Support Local and Bottom-Up Peacebuilding*

The United States should increase its financial, logistical, and technical support to local peace actors and bottom-up peacebuilding processes.

Although peacebuilders must tailor local conflict-resolution projects to each specific context, several measures are likely to be among the top priorities in many parts of Congo. Contested land ownership is a major source of tension and violence throughout the country, so supporting grassroots initiatives that resolve land disputes is essential. Reconciliation projects among families, clans, communities, militias, and social groups that have fought one another during the war are also likely to be appropriate in most districts and villages.

Instead of disbursing funds for the short term, as is the standard practice, United States donor agencies should conceive of their funding instruments as long-term budgets. This approach would ensure that the local peacebuilding projects are effective (because most require a multiyear commitment) and that local partners have time to gradually build up their capacity.

The massive amount of money spent on development and humanitarian programs can also help advance bottom-up conflict resolution. Some emergency relief projects clearly cannot and should not include peacebuilding measures, because such measures would compromise the projects' effectiveness or the aid workers' access to the population and, therefore, cost numerous lives. Nonetheless, many other humanitarian initiatives, as well as virtually all development programs, can and should include such measures.

Including a peacebuilding dimension in most aid programs would not only help increase resources for local conflict-resolution endeavors, but would also maximize their impact. By all accounts, conflict-resolution initiatives, such as reconciliation workshops and peace education projects, work best when combined with development or relief undertakings. For example, building a market, a school, or a health center shared by two communities in conflict helps reestablish social and commercial links between them, thus assuaging the tensions born of distrust and lack of communication and perpetuating the benefits of reconciliation workshops.

Combining development projects with local peacebuilding work is also a way to respond to the requests of many targeted communities. These communities routinely emphasize

that they can enjoy the benefits of reestablished peace only after their basic day-to-day needs are met. They also often underscore that providing alternative survival strategies for existing or potential militia members, as well as those who stand to lose their political, economic, or social power when the ongoing violence ends, is vital to creating sustainable peace programs. These alternative survival strategies can include food security and livelihood projects as well as education and job-training programs.

Letting local people develop their own analysis of the conflict and decide on the best solution (as recommended above) is particularly important when supporting local peace initiatives. Grassroots organizations and indigenous authorities know the local context best, and they already have extensive contacts. They are therefore most effective at designing and implementing bottom-up peacebuilding projects. In contrast, international interveners rarely have the knowledge or capacity to resolve local conflicts, so their direct involvement is more likely to worsen the situation than to improve it. Second, by letting local partners make decisions, international actors can support critical local projects while upholding the dominant norms of noninterference and respect for state sovereignty. Finally, working primarily through local partners minimizes the amount of work and staff needed to support local peacebuilding, thus keeping the costs manageable.

❖ *Linking Bottom-Up to Top-Down Efforts*

The Committee should consider how to connect this bottom-up support to peacebuilding efforts at the national and international level. This is especially important because the Congolese peace agreements have installed in power many of the provincial and national leaders who fueled local tensions during the wars and have continued to do so in recent years. In addition, certain combatants listen only to actors who have some kind of coercive capacity over them, such as provincial, national, or international officials. The intervention of United States diplomats—along with United Nations staff—is necessary to, on the one hand, help deter further violence and, on the other, signal to combatants a possibility for assistance, thus increasing the estimated peace dividends.

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United States Representatives, along with peacekeepers, international and non-governmental organizations' staff members, and foreign diplomats, can help Congo establish sustainable peace and a functioning democracy. But to do so, it is imperative that they build on local expertise and work with national elites, local leaders, and ordinary citizens to plan international programs. It is also crucial that they look beyond elections and support other local priorities.

Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Bass, Members of the Subcommittee, I am grateful for this opportunity to testify, and I look forward to any questions you may have.