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DOCUMENTS ON DEMOCRACY

China

On September 9, a group of NGOs, including Amnesty International, the International Campaign for Tibet, the World Uyghur Congress, Human Rights in China, and Christian Solidarity Worldwide, published an open letter to the UN Human Rights Council. They urged the Council to take action against systematic human-rights abuses by the People's Republic of China. The letter is excerpted below:

Across the People's Republic of China, human rights violations are a systemic reality. Over the past year, the UN has once again documented legal and policy frameworks that fail to protect against discrimination; stigmatise Islam and stifle freedom of religious belief; undermine a wide range of socioeconomic rights and those who defend them; and permit gross violations of due process, including secret trials and arbitrary and incommunicado detention. . . .

Chinese officials have stated, clearly and forcefully in public and in private, that "China is a country of rule of law" and "will not accept interference in its internal affairs." This is patently misleading.

The Communist Party of China uses China's laws to maintain state power, not to ensure justice. Overly broad charges that do not comply with the principle of legality are used to wrongfully detain, prosecute, and convict individuals for the peaceful exercise of internationally protected rights and participation in public affairs. In effect, any person who expresses views that differ from the Party narrative, or who seeks to highlight negative impacts of Party and government policies, can be caught in the crosshairs of criminalisation.

The Chinese government has refined and replicated a practice of characterizing all difference or dissent as terrorism, subversion, or a threat to national security. The tactics deployed in Hong Kong are regularly used against Uyghur and Tibetan peoples to justify a hard-line crackdown on the legitimate exercise of human rights. This is a dangerous departure from international human rights standards.

Furthermore, the Chinese government's human rights record is no longer an issue limited by its borders. The government has actively used laws and practices to disappear and detain foreign nationals, restrict access to information overseas, conduct surveillance of Chinese nationals and other exile communities, embolden its law enforcement outside Chinese borders, and impede public participation, sustainable development and transparency in third countries where China has political and economic interests. . . .

The silence of the international community has not only allowed this to decimate civil society within China, but also to endanger civil society defenders and other individuals critical of the Chinese government wherever they may be, including in the halls of the UN.

The same laws that allow the arbitrary deprivation of liberty of lawyers, public interest advocates, housing rights activists, and Christians in China's wealthy eastern areas are further refined and weaponised against ethnic and religious minorities in the west of the country, including Tibet, where international access is a significant concern. The large-scale detention program in Xinjiang, which has detained Uyghurs and other minorities, may amount to crimes against humanity. . . .

We call on the international community, and specifically the UN Human Rights Council, to stand in solidarity with the victims of human rights violations by the Chinese government, wherever they may be. This includes using all available avenues to press the Chinese government to comply with its obligations to ensure human rights and provide access to effective remedies for violations, as outlined in the UN Charter and human rights treaties. . . .

The defence of human rights is not a criminal act. The peaceful expression of dissent is not extremism. Universal rights are not subject to arbitrary limits under the guise of countering terrorism.

Moldova

Maia Sandu became prime minister of Moldova in June 2019, heading an unlikely coalition government between her own pro-EU electoral alliance and the pro-Russian Socialist Party. (Her government fell on November 12 following a vote of no-confidence.) On October 13, Sandu gave the keynote address at the Forum 2000 conference in Prague. Her speech, entitled "1989 Remains an Inspiration," is excerpted below:

The last decade has not been kind to democracy promoters around the world and the last few years have been particularly dire. Despite the historical legacy of 1989, Europe is not immune to democratic backsliding. Yet, I am proud to say that just like in 1989, Eastern Europe is at the forefront of the battle for democracy and is leading the way in defending democratic freedoms.

My country is a case in point. Despite disillusionment with democratic transition, constant struggle with endemic corruption and endless battle to escape poverty, Moldovan citizens, just like our good friends and neighbors from Ukraine, Armenia and Georgia, have never given up on democracy, even if, at times, the fight seemed lost.

The courage and determination of Moldovan citizens to demand basic democratic freedoms and to reject the state capture imposed on them by a handful of plunderers is admirable. Moreover, it gives hope to others in the region and beyond that democracy is not just an ideal, but a product of hard work and dedication.

In 1989 Francis Fukuyama announced the “End of History.” But for a small Soviet Republic, Moldova, history was only beginning. My personal story was quite telling of the times. In the autumn of 1989, I left my parents’ house and moved to Chisinau, where, as a first-year student, I became part of a new, bustling world. Change could be felt everywhere. *Perestroika* unleashed immense energy and created hope for a rapid break with the past. Decades long fear of standing up for real beliefs and national values, along with the habit of compliance, were fading away despite repression.

People were meeting, self-organizing, discussing things that were unthinkable a decade earlier, adopting resolutions, demanding freedoms and respect for national values, protesting, and making plans for the future. The regime’s opposition to these developments could not stop us. We were discovering first-hand what freedom and democracy mean.

Today, I want to pay my deep respect to Moldova’s independence movement, to a generation of Moldova’s idealistic intellectuals, who laid the foundation for a new Moldova in the 1980s and 1990s, through their personal sacrifice against the oppressive regime. My entire public career is part of this idealistic movement.

The Autumn of Nations, Solidarity and Lech Walesa, Václav Havel, the Popular Fronts in the Baltic States and the Chain of Freedom, have made a profound impact on us, those who were longing for a future where we would be free. To me and my fellow countrymen, the dissolution of the Soviet Union was not the geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century.

It was exactly the opposite, the beginning of a brighter, better, free future for our country. Establishing democracy and freedom would not happen quickly or easily, and Moldova would have a lot of backsliding. But from that time, democracy and fundamental freedoms have become the key standards which would guide our future struggles.

On the last summer day of 1989, we won a key victory over the Communist regime. We obtained the right to use the Latin alphabet, and we took up again our road back to Europe, back to our spiritual home. One year later we declared our independence. We were optimistic and confident about the future. Moldova faced a task of reinventing itself to become a modern market economy, and we expected that democracy and

freedom would take root fast. We were mistaken. Our society was too divided along geopolitical lines, our historical wounds were too deep and authoritarian proclivities were too ingrained for a quick happy end.

Soon after independence, the war in Transnistria occurred. We had no prior history of independence and statehood to build on. We had difficult historical, national, political and social settings. We had no tradition of public administration and we inherited a Soviet public administration system, with institutional inefficiencies, excessive controls and lack of accountability.

The economy collapsed and by 1999, 72 percent of people fell under the poverty line. As economic opportunities shrank, Moldovans began to leave the country in search for more stable sources of income abroad. Even though in the first ten years of independence we managed to secure important democratic freedoms, the economic disaster and the high social costs of transition brought the Communist party back to power in 2001. Difficult economic realities prevailed. The Communist party promised to turn back the clock.

Moldova's economy picked up and poverty indicators improved, but democracy was pushed back. An oppressive state that emerged under the Communist party was permeated by monopolies. Hidden from public view, tycoons built up their power and wealth, monopolized import and export markets and populated the public administration system with people personally loyal to them in order to extract rent from their control over the government.

The past decade started with the revolution of young people against the Communist state. They were fighting for the same values that we fought for in the early 1990s—democracy, freedom and a path towards the European Union. The government that emerged at the time promised to combat corruption and transform the judiciary, the police and the prosecution into rule-based institutions functioning with integrity and public trust.

The opposite happened. The gains from that revolution of the young were quickly privatized by oligarchic groups which used the momentum to get rid of the Communist regime and capture the state themselves. The young people, some of whom were tortured during the events of April 2009, started to lose hope and were leaving the country.

Corruption became embedded in public institutions, especially in law enforcement, the judicial system and the public service. The elite opposed any reforms of the political system that served their own interests.

In 2015, when the entire world found out that government institutions, including the National Bank, were complicit when around 12 percent of the country's GDP was stolen in a massive banking fraud, Moldovans took to the streets again to demand better governance and punishment of those involved in high-level corruption. But politicians once again managed to divide and disband the protests by playing on geopolitical differences.

What followed was the darkest period in Moldova's history, with fear

and despair overwhelming Moldova's society. We ended up with a captured state, in which government institutions persecuted political opponents and extracted illegal revenue from the government. Moldova's democracy index fell to a "hybrid regime" for the first time in its independent history. The EU froze its assistance programs for Moldova. Defending democratic processes and institutions became difficult and dangerous. Politics went underground. Criminal cases against political activists and their supporters, persecutions from law enforcement and relentless propaganda became the norm.

We fought for democracy, again. And in this fight for democracy, we again relied on our 1989 generation. The generation that made independence possible continues to be the most active part of our society and the most courageous one.

The regime that was running Moldova in the last four years fell. It fell because the Moldovan people, regardless of the language they speak, regardless of their ethnicity and political preferences, have all come to value free speech, the freedom of assembly and the freedom to pursue their calling in life. . . .

Moldova has a long way to go. Unlike the Baltic states and Eastern/Central European countries, who have clearly proclaimed that their future is in the European Union and pursued this goal with vigor and conviction, building on their prior history of public administration and statehood, we have taken too many detours, have gotten lost in too many side streets. . . .

In these 30 years, we have learned that democracy is very fragile. You build it through a lot of work and dedication. It means real sacrifice. In the last few years, for example, it meant for some Moldovan journalists working for very small pay or sometimes even for free. It meant for us establishing a political party which survived on an annual budget of 25,000 euros and which was based exclusively on voluntary work. It meant to have courage to continue when activists were threatened with criminal files.

Democracy is constant struggle. Democracy must be conquered. Democracy must be defended, and democracy must be built day by day. This is the key lesson of 1989 for us.

Ethiopia

On December 10, Ethiopian prime minister Abiy Ahmed was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Abiy received the award for his role in ending the decades-long conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea, and for the reforms he has instituted in Ethiopia since succeeding Hailemariam Desalegn as prime minister in April 2018. His acceptance speech is excerpted below:

Today, I stand here in front of you talking about peace because of fate. I crawled my way to peace through the dusty trenches of war years ago. I was a young soldier when war broke out between Ethiopia and Eritrea.

I witnessed firsthand the ugliness of war in frontline battles. There are those who have never seen war but glorify and romanticize it. They have not seen the fear. They have not seen the fatigue. They have not seen the destruction or heartbreak. Nor have they felt the mournful emptiness of war after the carnage. War is the epitome of hell for all involved. I know because I have been there and back. . . .

Ultimately, peace requires an enduring vision. And my vision of peace is rooted in the philosophy of *medemer*. *Medemer*, an Amharic word, signifies synergy, convergence, and teamwork for a common destiny. *Medemer* is a homegrown idea that is reflected in our political, social, and economic life. I like to think of *medemer* as a social compact for Ethiopians to build a just, egalitarian, democratic, and humane society by pulling together our resources for our collective survival and prosperity.

In practice, *medemer* is about using the best of our past to build a new society and a new civic culture that thrives on tolerance, understanding, and civility. At its core, *medemer* is a covenant of peace that seeks unity in our common humanity. It pursues peace by practicing the values of love, forgiveness, reconciliation, and inclusion. . . . For the people in the “Land of Origins” and “The Thirteen Months of Sunshine,” *medemer* has always been second nature. Ethiopians maintained peaceful coexistence between the followers of the two great religions because we always came together in faith and worship. . . . The beauty of our Ethiopia is its extraordinary diversity. The inclusiveness of *medemer* ensures no one is left behind in our big extended family. . . .

Over the past few months, Ethiopia has made historic investments in peace, the returns of which we will see in years to come. We have released all political prisoners. We have shut down detention facilities where torture and vile human rights abuses took place. Today, Ethiopia is highly regarded for press freedom. It is no more a “jailor of journalists”. Opposition leaders of all political stripes are free to engage in peaceful political activity. We are creating an Ethiopia that is second to none in its guarantee of freedoms of expression. We have laid the groundwork for genuine multiparty democracy, and we will soon hold a free and fair election. . . .

Standing on this world stage today, I would like to call upon all my fellow Ethiopians to join hands and help build a country that offers equal justice, equal rights, and equal opportunities for all its citizens. I would like to especially express that we should avoid the path of extremism and division, powered by politics of exclusion. Our accord hangs in the balance of inclusive politics.

The evangelists of hate and division are wreaking havoc in our society using social media. They are preaching the gospel of revenge and retribution on the airwaves. Together, we must neutralize the toxin of hatred by creating a civic culture of consensus-based democracy, inclusivity, civility, and tolerance based on *medemer* principles. . . .

I am inspired by a Biblical scripture which reads: “Blessed are the

peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.” Equally I am also inspired by a Holy Quran verse which reads: “Humanity is but a single brotherhood. So, make peace with your brethren.” I am committed to toil for peace every single day and in all seasons. I am my brother’s keeper. I am my sister’s keeper too. I have promises to keep before I sleep. I have miles to go on the road of peace.

Russia

On September 17, a working group established by exiled former political prisoner Mikhail Khodorkovsky published an open letter calling for free and fair elections in Russia. Seventy-seven scholars and activists signed the letter, including historian Anne Applebaum, Anders Åslund of the Atlantic Council, Oxford professor Timothy Garton Ash, Russian activist Garry Kasparov, Adam Michnik of Gazeta Wyborcza, and philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy. The letter is excerpted below:

The citizens of Russia are merely demanding from their government rights that we in the free world take for granted: The right to participate and vote in free and fair elections; an end to criminal proceedings against activists participating in peaceful protests; and accountability for police officers who unnecessarily use force against peaceful demonstrators. . . .

Widespread lawlessness, the arrest of political opponents, violence by police officers against peaceful residents, the unlawful detainment of children, threats to parents—all have become common practice in Russia. There are already over two-hundred political prisoners in the country. Every basic human right has been violated, the Constitution completely ignored, and elections turned into democratic window dressing.

These individuals, who break the law and violate the human rights of their own citizens, cynically take advantage of the rights and freedoms of democratic nations. They use our lobbyists, lawyers, former politicians, and intelligence officers for their own ends. They corrupt acting politicians and officials and put pressure on private businesses, pushing many to play by their rules and work in favor of their interests. . . .

We must adopt an uncompromising stance toward residents of democratic states who help president Putin and his cronies with the laundering of stolen Russian capital. . . . We also appeal to international companies whose business is important to the realization of the democratic rights and freedoms that we value. Russian authorities are trying to force such companies, from Facebook to Google, to comply with domestic laws that stifle civil society. We consider this pressure to be illegal and call on the international business community not to succumb and to demand political independence when operating in Russia.

We express solidarity with every member of the worldwide opposition to president Putin’s regime.