

Senator Richard Durbin
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Political Prisoners in Azerbaijan, Saudi Arabia, and Ethiopia
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Mr. DURBIN: Mr. President, we have a number of challenging foreign policy issues at the moment – from Russian aggression in Ukraine to ISIL and the Syrian civil war to stemming climate change.

Yet amid these larger demands, it is important to remember there are many smaller struggles going on all over the world that are also important – struggles for basic political freedoms which can still result in jailings or worse.

Today I would like to mention a number of such brave individuals who are being detained for exercising or advocating for such democratic values.

First, I am deeply troubled by the recent crackdown on human rights activists in Azerbaijan – part of a disturbing pattern in that country that has significantly deteriorated during the last year.

The New York Times summed it up nicely in its recent editorial by describing Azeri President Aliyev as a modern-day “Jekyll and Hyde” who is able to convince the world that he plays nice with the West while creating one of the worst human rights records at the same time.

Aliyev wants the world to believe that Azerbaijan is a model country that promotes moderate Islam, has strong relations with the West, and is an ideal host for the upcoming European games, yet it currently holds more political prisoners than Russia and Belarus combined – not a great distinction to be sure.

At the end of 2014, Aliyev’s henchmen brazenly raided Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty offices in Baku, just weeks after the government arrested one of the country’s best known investigative reporters, Khadija Ismayilova. After more than 2 months of detention, she was charged with embezzlement, illegal entrepreneurship, tax evasion and abuse of power--similar charges to those of other human rights activists.

Last August, Senators *Cardin*, *Murphy*, and I sent a letter to President Aliyev expressing our concern over the imprisonment of Anar Mammadli and Bashir Suleymanli, the chair and the executive director of the Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Center, an organization that promotes free and fair elections in Azerbaijan.

Recently, Bashir was finally released but his colleague Anar remains behind bars.

Just prior, police arrested Leyla Yunus, the director of the Institute for Peace and Democracy. The very next week, the police followed up by arresting her husband, Arif Yunus; fellow activist, Rasul Jafarov, a human rights defender and chairman of the Human Rights Club; and Intigam Aliyev, the country's most prominent human rights lawyer and the 2012 winner of the prestigious Homo Homini Award for his work defending the rule of law in Azerbaijan.

Last month, the Washington Post ran a powerful letter on its opinion page written recently by Khadija where she states that the reason she is in prison is because of the regime's corruption and vows to continue to expose that corruption. Less than a week later the Azeri government suddenly called for a closed-door trial and found her guilty of criminal libel.

To quote her piece in the Post: "The fight between good and evil goes on, and the most important thing is that this fight should not end. If we can continue to reject the thinking that is imposed on us and believe that human dignity is not for sale, then we are the winners, and they, our jailers both inside and outside prison, are the losers."

Sadly, this is just a snapshot of the many brave Azeris or organizations facing trumped-up charges or imprisonment for simply exercising basic political freedoms.

To them, I say, the world is aware of your plight and courage. And to President Aliyev, I urge you to release your own people whose only offense has been to ask for a peaceful democratic Azerbaijan. You cannot be a part of the Western community of democracies while violating its core democratic principles.

Second, Mr. President, is Saudi Arabia – a country that is an important ally to the United States on many issues and yet could not be more different when it comes to basic freedoms.

I have spoken about human rights concerns in Saudi Arabia on the floor before – the troubling lack of freedoms for women and the use of obsolete blasphemy and apostasy laws to stifle freedom of religion and expression.

In 2012, the Saudi Government imprisoned a young blogger named Hamza Kashgari for tweets considered blasphemous.

Fortunately, after nearly 2 years, I was pleased to hear of his release.

Writer and activist Raif Badawi, however, has not been so fortunate.

Also imprisoned in 2012, Raif Badawi was sentenced to 10 years in prison and 1,000 lashes for apparently launching a Web site that suggested a peaceful discussion about religion.

He received his first set of 50 lashes in public on January 9, and spent his 31st birthday in jail, severely wounded.

His wife, Ensaf Haidar, who fled to Canada with their three children after she began receiving anonymous death threats because of her husband's case, fears her husband may not be able to physically withstand another round of lashings.

I was relieved to hear that after international outrage about this treatment as well as serious concern about his health, Raif's next rounds of floggings have been repeatedly postponed. His case was referred to the Supreme Court in Riyadh only to be returned back to the Court of Appeals in Jeddah, where reports indicate he may be retried and even worse, could face the death penalty.

Raif's lawyer, Waleed Abu al-Khair, a prominent human rights activist in his own right and head of the Monitor of Human Rights in Saudi Arabia, was himself arrested and sentenced to 15 years in prison followed by a ban on travel for 15 years.

Also concerning is that his case was taken up by the Specialized Criminal Court in Jeddah, which was created in 2008 to deal with terrorist suspects but has also taken to trying human rights activists on dubious charges.

I sent a letter to Saudi Arabia in January along with several colleagues – Senators *Leahy, Shaheen, Rubio, Feinstein, Wyden, Kirk, and Boxer* – urging the release of both Raif and Waleed.

My staff has also met with Samar Badawi – she is Waleed's wife and Raif's sister, and she is an activist in her own right – it is a whole family of activists. For years she has been a strong advocate for women's rights in Saudi Arabia and has served her own time in jail for it.

In fact, in 2012, she was one of the recipients of the International Women of Courage Award from the State Department.

Samar and others have raised the profile of countless women who have stood up for their rights in a country where zealous interpretations of religion and traditional customs guide Saudi laws, like the one requiring all women to have a male guardian.

The guardianship law automatically restricts Saudi women from driving, as many of you know, but also from making their own choices regarding marriage and divorce, employment, travel, banking, and countless other basic life decisions.

Raif, Waleed, and Samar are only a few of the many independent activists and peaceful dissidents in Saudi Arabia who have faced persecution.

Now, like many of you, I was saddened to hear of the passing of King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz on January 23. Many have described him as a man of vision, peace, and reform.

As his brother, Salman, takes the seat as the new King of Saudi Arabia, I hope he will take every opportunity to free Raif, Waleed, and others jailed on account of their beliefs, to allow greater

room for political debate and freedoms, and renounce any further prosecutions under charges of apostasy or blasphemy.

Last, Mr. President, I would like to turn the attention toward Ethiopia, a country I last visited in 2010, when I had the opportunity to meet with then-Prime Minister Meles.

Meles' government made many advances and Ethiopia was and remains an ally and leader a difficult region. It has also received millions over the years in development assistance from the United States.

And yet, Ethiopia continues to be a country with a troubling human rights record, particularly regarding freedom of the press.

Many had hoped that new Ethiopian Prime Minister Hailemariam would bring a change to his late predecessor's human rights policies.

Unfortunately, last July the Ethiopian Government charged six bloggers and three journalists--known collectively as the Zone 9 Bloggers – under a broadly used terrorism law, despite any credible evidence be offered.

Sadly, these bloggers seem to have been arrested to narrow the already small space for free media expression in Ethiopia.

Some of you may have heard of Eskinder Nega, a prominent independent journalist who was critical of the Ethiopian Government and was detained on eight different occasions before being convicted in 2012 on terrorism charges and sentenced to 18 years in prison.

Others may know of Reeyot Alemu, a schoolteacher and columnist with one of Ethiopia's last remaining independent papers was also convicted in 2012 on counts of terrorism and sentenced to 5 years in prison. Reeyot has breast cancer and is in desperate need of urgent and proper medical care beyond what prison can provide.

Both Eskinder and Reeyot have won prestigious international awards for their work while serving prison terms. Both represent the plight of their countless colleagues in the industry who have suffered threats, intimidation, politically motivated prosecutions, and even physical abuse.

I sent a letter with Senators *Boxer* and *Menendez* to the Ethiopian Government about the Zone 9 Bloggers last summer and I know Secretary Kerry has also raised their cases. I am troubled to hear that a fair and transparent trial for them only continues to be delayed.

In fact, their case was adjourned 20 times before the group finally had the opportunity to plead not guilty in court last month, only to be adjourned again for March 30, just shortly before the Ethiopian general elections in May.

Prime Minister Hailemariam, you have an opportunity to turn the page on your country's human rights record by reversing a troubling pattern of press harassment.

These are just a few of the many political prisoners around the globe that struggle, often at great risk, for a better future for their fellow countrymen and women and for their children. I want them and their families – and the governments unjustly holding them – to know that they are not forgotten.

I will continue to draw attention to their plight and work for their release, along with my colleagues here in Congress and their countless advocates around the world.