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Hearing of the House Foreign Affairs Committee International Organizations, Human Rights and Oversight Subcommittee

Ideals vs. Reality in Human Rights and US Foreign Policy: the Cases of Azerbaijan, Cuba and Egypt.

Room 2172, Rayburn House Office Building, 2:00 pm, July 12, 2007

This hearing featured three witnesses: Ms. [Jennifer L. Windsor](#), Executive Director of Freedom House, [Morton H. Halperin](#), Ph.D, Senior Fellow at the Center for American Progress and Mr. [Frank Calzón](#), Executive Director of the Center for a Free Cuba. There were also four subcommittee members present: **Chairman Delahunt** (D-MA), **Ranking Member Rohrabacher** (R-CA), **Rep. Flake** (R-AZ), and **Rep. Meeks** (D-NY).

This afternoon's hearing is the third in a series examining inconsistencies in US foreign policy toward countries with poor human rights records. The series, originally titled "Is There a Human Rights Double-Standard?" was recently changed to "Ideals vs. Reality in Human Rights and US Foreign Policy."

Chairman Delahunt opened the hearing by expressing concerns that the United States is inciting international enmity through occasions where "our rhetoric is not supported by our deeds and actions." He noted that, "while we say we support human rights and democracy, we still support oppressive regimes," pointing out the US' close relationship and generous military aid package given to Egypt. Indicating charts from Freedom House, Rep. Delahunt pointed out that, not only are overall amounts of friendship and aid widely variant between the three countries under discussion, but so is the type of aid. Notably, Freedom House's data showed that while 100 percent of aid to Cuba is democracy promotion, less than one percent of aid to Egypt qualifies as such.

Rep. Delahunt expressed hope that, before August, legislation would be introduced to create a congressional commission to report on the US' own compliance with its democratic ideals.

Rep. Rohrabacher said that, as in the case of Egypt, the US needs to look at the impact that other governments have on the stability of the region. He said, "Egypt is playing a very important role [in Middle Eastern peace] at great risk" to itself. Rep. Rohrabacher expressed the sense that the

US is at war with “radical Islam,” that “they hate us, not our foreign policy,” and that “we need to defeat this evil, just as we defeated communism and Nazism.”

Ms. Windsor began by noting the challenges of integrating human rights into foreign policy, saying that, despite official rhetoric, “[e]conomic and security interests often have trumped the promotion of human rights in various countries.” She says that, ironically, the Bush administration’s vocal promotion of democracy has actually highlighted our inconsistencies, damaging our credibility. Windsor expressed a belief that the US can make a difference; the amount of which depends on how much we listen and respond to those voices emerging from these countries pushing for democratic change. In order to be effective, she instructs, the US needs to set the highest standard, protect those on the front lines and (especially for Members of Congress) actively engage with pro-democracy, pro-human rights groups, “never let[ting] human rights fall off the table.”

Mr. Halperin prefaced his testimony with a rejection of the notion that, as the title of the hearing indicated, there is a contest between “Ideals” and “Reality.” He explained that these are not necessarily competing ideas and that both are simplifications but, regardless, should be pursued concurrently. “The national interest,” he said, “can only emerge from the political process,” a process that takes into account peoples’ views and passions. As such, it is not necessary that all countries be treated exactly the same. However, Halperin maintained that we should always guard human rights and democracy as a significant interest. “The President has enough to do without having lunch with dictators,” he continued, “When we honor dictators and ignore opposition, we undercut support for human rights and democracy.”

In cases where the United States is providing aid, Halperin said that it remains very important to take into account the countries’ commitment to human rights. “It is extraordinary to me that Egypt continues to be the second largest recipient of aid, given their human rights record,” he said. He recommended working multi-laterally, striving to continue to make the UN Human Rights Council more effective.

Mr. Calzon spoke largely on the abysmal human rights record of Fidel Castro’s regime in Cuba. He expressed his approval for the continued travel ban to the country as well as the need for continued US support for opposition groups within the country, saying, “We must defend the human rights of others as if they were our own.”

In the Question/Answer portion, a lively debate emerged over the United States’ own human rights record, citing the use of harsh interrogation tactics. Rep. Rohrabacher was the primary proponent, while the witnesses largely held the opposing view. Windsor told the subcommittee that, in discussions with members of the military, she has heard that these tactics have actually made us, as a country, less safe. Halperin added, “not only [are these tactics] against human rights, but also against American law.”