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for Middle East Policy



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June 8, 2020

The Honorable James E. Risch  
Chairman  
Senate Foreign Relations Committee  
423 Dirksen Senate Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Eliot L. Engel  
Chairman  
House Foreign Affairs Committee  
2170 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Risch and Chairman Engel,

As non-governmental organizations that work to protect human rights and rule of law-based governance, we write to express our support for the bipartisan, bicameral Protecting Human Rights During Pandemic Act (PHRDPA) (S. 3819 / H.R. 6986). The PHRDPA would enable the U.S. government to take meaningful action in the face of egregious laws and policies enacted by some foreign governments to centralize power, censor their citizens, and otherwise curb human rights and fundamental freedoms under the guise of addressing the coronavirus pandemic. Given the strong bipartisan support demonstrated by the PHRDPA's list of initial cosponsors, we respectfully urge that you move to mark up this important bill, and urge floor passage as soon as practicable.

As you know, amid the coronavirus pandemic, governments around the world have undertaken extraordinary measures to address public health. While many of these steps have been appropriate to the circumstances, in many instances governments have also exploited legitimate concerns about the pandemic to institute laws and policies that are clearly aimed at consolidating power, stifling civil society, restricting independent journalism, limiting individual freedoms, curtailing political opposition, and discriminating against marginalized populations.

During this precarious moment, it is crucial that the U.S. government lead as a global defender of human rights. That's why each of the signatories to this letter has supported the PHRDPA. While not a panacea, enactment of S. 3819 / H.R. 6986 would benefit those on the front lines fighting to protect human dignity and rule of law. Specifically, the PHRDPA would:

- require the State Department and USAID to outline a five-year strategy to address “the persistent issues related to internationally recognized human rights in the aftermath of the novel coronavirus response,” and authorize the establishment of foreign assistance programs designed specifically to support civil society organizations and human rights defenders in countries where the abuse of emergency measures has resulted in the violation of human rights;
- prohibit, subject to a waiver in “extraordinary circumstances,” the U.S. government from providing security sector assistance to countries engaging in a “consistent pattern of gross violations of internationally recognized human rights” by way of “emergency laws, policies, or administrative procedures;” and
- institute various reporting requirements that will help shed light on and maintain the U.S. government’s focus on human rights violations often associated with abusive emergency powers.

At a time when governments worldwide are using the coronavirus pandemic as a pretext for abusive emergency power grabs, U.S. leadership in support of universal human rights has rarely been more important. We commend the PHRDPA’s co-sponsors—Senators Markey, Blackburn, Cardin, Cramer, Loeffler, Merkley, Murphy, Wicker, and Young; and Representatives McGovern, Wagner, Bilirakis, Fitzpatrick, Malinowski, and Raskin—for their leadership on this matter, and again respectfully urge you to advance this important bill as swiftly as possible.

Sincerely,

Amnesty International USA  
American Jewish World Service  
Committee to Protect Journalists  
Council for Global Equality  
Freedom House  
Human Rights First  
Human Rights Watch  
International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL)  
PEN America  
Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED)  
The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP)  
US-Europe Alliance  
Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA)

CC The Honorable Robert Menendez & The Honorable Michael McCaul