

U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE
COMMISSION ON UNALIENABLE RIGHTS
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Good afternoon. My name is Thor Halvorssen. I am the Chief Executive Officer of the Human Rights Foundation, a position I have held since the organization was founded in the year 2005. I am grateful to the Commission on Unalienable Rights and to Ambassador Mary Glendon for inviting me to share the perspectives of HRF with you today.

The Human Rights Foundation was created fifteen years ago by a group of individuals that included Vaclav Havel, Elie Wiesel, Harry Wu, Armando Valladares, Eduardo Mendoza, and James Q. Wilson. We initially came together to respond to the vacuum that existed in the human rights field when it came to monitoring, researching, and addressing what a group of us saw as the erosion of democracy, as defined by the Inter-American Democratic Charter, taking place in the Western Hemisphere, specifically in Venezuela, Nicaragua, Ecuador, and Bolivia. What was occurring in these countries was the slow-motion suffocation of civil society, the destruction of freedom of expression and of the press, the systematic violation of the separation of powers, and the gradual elimination of free and fair elections by governments ruled by democratically-elected leaders with authoritarian personalities all of whom expressed open admiration for then-octogenarian dictator Fidel Castro in Cuba, and expressed their will to install dictatorial Cuba-like regimes in their own countries.

One would think that the international organizations in the human rights field—the establishment ones with annual budgets in the \$50 million to \$100 million range— would have the experience, the expertise, and the resources to address these crises. Yet they didn't. I could spend a considerable amount of time today depressing you with breathtaking and frustrating anecdotes of watching a spectacular country like my home country, Venezuela, slowly descend into darkness while the international human rights groups whose charge, theoretically, was to witness and raise the alarm, sat back and did very little until at least 10 years of Chavismo had passed, and it was far too late for international human rights watchdog pressure to stop Hugo Chavez. There are consequences to inaction. To quote Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German protestant theologian who was hanged in one of Hitler's concentration camps in the last days of the National Socialist dictatorship: "If I see a madman driving a car into a group of innocent bystanders, then I can't, as a Christian, simply wait for the catastrophe and then comfort the wounded

and bury the dead. I must try to wrestle the steering wheel out of the hands of the driver.”
Members of the Commission: Venezuela was a slow-motion catastrophe, utterly preventable.

At HRF we decided, regardless of whether the world would listen, to bear witness and to raise the alarm and promote non-violent action. We began by assisting political prisoners—individuals engaged in non-violent activism who are persecuted and imprisoned for their beliefs. We wanted them to know they weren’t alone. Further, we believed that telling the story of a political prisoner would humanize the plight of an entire country and so we initiated a campaign calling on the Organization of American States to enforce the Inter-American Democratic Charter and we took political prisoner cases from Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia, literally years and years before these other human rights organizations even recognized that a problem of democratic erosion or political prisoners even existed in these nations.

The focus of the other organizations was, sadly, not on the descent into dictatorship of countries ruled by authoritarian caudillos openly paying homage and pledging admiration to the only 60-year-old totalitarian regime in the Western Hemisphere, but instead they allocated resources for the Americas on the monitoring and criticism of democracies in the region, including very prominently the United States, Brazil, Colombia and Chile, which, in our view and that of international indexes on democratic standards (such as Freedom House’s Freedom in the World index), were comparatively very open and democratic, and, so, had the domestic institutions—freedom of the press, vibrant political parties system, independent judiciaries, and so on.—to air and address their existing issues with rights abuses at all governmental levels, namely national, state or local.

Let me be clear, at the Human Rights Foundation we believe it is vitally important for international human rights organizations to hold democracies to a high standard, but we think it is poor judgment to, in practice, hold dictatorships to a lower standard than democracies by focusing the overwhelming majority of your time and resources on democracies and, to that extent, neglect the countries who are actually descending into authoritarianism. Moreover, we believe this approach is inefficient as it makes the international human rights groups domestic political actors whose actions overlap with multiple institutions and organizations in countries where civil societies are vibrant, where political parties aren’t persecuted, where media can criticize the government freely and the people can make public policy choices through elections that are free and fair, and where there are no political prisoners, in the sense that we understand the term—people who are

imprisoned for exercising their basic human rights, namely their right to criticize their governments.

Although we began our work on the underreported human rights violations in this hemisphere, we quickly expanded our focus to other regions namely, the Middle East and North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, East and Central Asia, and Eastern Europe. So, today, we are global in our scope. And while our scope is global our focus is not on every country in the world. Before I go further, I'd like to provide some important context.

The big problems in the world affect tens if not hundreds of millions of people. Many of them helpless. Consider the world's most intractable problems: The numbers are so vast it's almost unthinkable.

Terrorism: 15,952 people have been killed and 22,651 people have been injured from acts of terrorism worldwide.

Refugees: 26 million people are refugees.

Natural Disasters affect 92 million people

736 million people live under extreme poverty.

785 million people have no clean water.

And two billion people live in conflict affected areas of the world.

There is an ecosystem of government departments, foundations, charities, and even conferences set up to address these problems.

However, there is one problem that affects a greater number of people than all of this. In fact, more people than all of these major problems, combined.

More than 4 billion people live under authoritarian government. That's 54% of the world's population –they are suffering under elected authoritarians, corrupt tyrants, absolute monarchs, and military juntas.

It's the largest challenge facing humanity. And by authoritarian government I am referring both to full-fledged dictatorships like Cuba or Syria as well as to "competitive authoritarian regimes"—a term that describes elected but non-democratic "hybrid regimes" as coined by Harvard University and Toronto University political scientists Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way. Competitive authoritarian regimes, like that of Nicaragua, remain in power despite the existence of periodic elections, because these elections are no longer free or fair. The

electoral process is rigged in favor of incumbents, who tightly control the judiciary and use it to systematically harass the political opposition, the independent media, and civil society.

And while there is a massive global industry to address problems like extreme poverty there is no such coordinated effort being waged against authoritarianism.

What's more, authoritarianism is at the root of the problems previously mentioned.

Consider that the vast majority of refugees are fleeing authoritarianism — almost 97% of the world's refugees come from countries ruled by an authoritarian government. Whether it's Eritrea or Venezuela or Syria.

Consider another problem: war. The leaders of authoritarian regimes are in permanent state of war, often with a foreign power and always with their own people. On the other hand, if there is an iron clad rule in political theory—one which has been confirmed through the 20th Century and was foreshadowed hundreds of years ago by political philosophers Immanuel Kant, Thomas Paine, and Alexis de Tocqueville—it is that a liberal democracy that respects individual rights will never or hardly ever go to war with another liberal democracy that respects individual rights.

Consider poverty: Countries ruled by authoritarian governments dominate the list of the poorest countries in the world; 9 out of the 10 poorest countries are ruled by authoritarian governments, and 23 out of the 30 poorest countries are ruled by authoritarian governments. The world's poorest countries remain poor because they are authoritarian not the other way around. The same can be said about the countries that lack clean water—18 out of the 20 countries with the worst access to basic drinking water are ruled by authoritarian governments.

Medicine, education, commerce, technology, and economics— all advances in these fields occur primarily in free countries. And the times when a dictatorship seems to be making strides in a field like technology? It's usually because they stole the technology.

And if the conversation were to turn to environmental stewardship, climate change or global warming, I should underline that the world's largest polluter is a dictatorship.

When it comes to protection of the environment, countries with governments that are not accountable to their people, have no public pressure incentive to reform. Consider that

there are few independent environmental organizations operating inside the world's largest tyranny: China. Whatever promises and grand gestures the Chinese dictator claims to make about stewardship of the environment cannot be effectively verified or monitored.

The opportunity cost of dictatorship is impossibly large – think about the talent and innovation lost from 4 Bn people whose potential is asphyxiated by the lack of freedom.

So, where do these 4 billion people go for help? Where can they turn to? A similar question is why do we universally fail to see this problem as a problem?

The easy way out, many people think, is to turn to the U.S. government.

Sadly, the U.S. government, as any government made of democratically-elected officials, tends to follow short-term political objectives. So, short-term economic and national security considerations take precedent over a long-term vision committed to human rights and long-term democratic stability. That's why the President of the United States can be counted on to vigorously protest the regime in Iran but the President says very little about human rights violations in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and today Secretary Pompeo is meeting with Mohamed Bin Salman, a man who in all likelihood, as documented by the UN Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial Killings, Agnes Callamard, directed the murder of a *Washington Post* opinion writer. Similar analogies can be made between the treatment accorded to the Egyptian dictatorship in contrast to the treatment accorded to the Sudanese dictatorship.

And I could spend hours on how embarrassing it is for me, an immigrant to these United States from a country that is now a dictatorship, to watch three successive presidents: Bush, Obama, and now Trump, treat Vladimir Putin as a friend worthy of admiration as opposed to as the man who orders the imprisonment of human rights defenders, journalists, and civil society activists when he is not ordering their murders.

In all fairness to American government hypocrisy I should point out that the European governments' venality is not that much different to that of the U.S. In fact, the contrast is much sharper, in terms of their lack of leadership, when assessing the double standards of

the European Community with for instance, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and, most especially, Cuba.

So, do we go to the United Nations with the problem of authoritarianism?

Surely, I don't need to explain to this Commission that the United Nations, once established to bring peace and freedom to the world, is to a large degree a playground for dictatorships who are hell bent on using the term "human rights" to mask their crimes and human rights violations. The U.N. system sends us a powerful message when it includes on the UN Human Rights Council authoritarian governments such as Angola, Pakistan, Eritrea, and Venezuela.

It is profoundly troubling that the UN Commission for the Status of Women includes so many governments from countries where the practice of female genital mutilation is commonplace and where child brides as young as 11 are systematically forced into marriage with adult men.

So, if we cannot turn to governments and we can't go the UN is the philanthropic sector able to address these issues?

Sadly, the topic of dictatorship is hardly ever addressed as a target at major conferences worldwide. In fact, sometimes the opposite is true. The Clinton Global Initiative, when it existed, received considerable sums of money from dictatorships. And the World Economic Forum—an organization who says it is "committed to improving the state of the world" frequently features dictators as honored guests and speakers and is actually financed in part by dictatorial regimes. It was certainly jarring to see the public relations effort of the Saudis on display this year at Davos where enormous banners promoted the newly formed Mohamed Bin Salman Foundation.

And so, the burden falls to human rights organizations.

But as I expressed earlier, it's not that simple, the main two human rights organizations in the world today, analyzed statistically, focus their resources primarily on the criticism of democracies and only a fraction of their resources on the world's worst governments.

In truth, the struggle against dictatorship has fallen on the individual activists and dissidents who heroically and nonviolently resist authoritarian regimes. Working in exile

or inside their countries in a siege mentality situation, these activists are willing to risk their lives and their livelihoods, and devote themselves to non-violent action to bring about change in their own countries.

At HRF we believe it is essential to honor their sacrifice by using the freedoms we enjoy inside a democracy to help others achieve theirs.

For this, two key outcomes are necessary.

The first is to bring authoritarianism to the top of the world's agenda. To cut through the partisan divide between right and left and unite behind the idea of free, liberal-democratic nations, and an absolute rejection of authoritarian regimes. Quite simply, to raise awareness and to transform our understanding of the world as split into free and not free, democratic and authoritarian. And this means two things. The first is to ensure that governments aren't classified into good dictatorships and bad dictatorships—in the past this was usually done by individuals depending on where they identified on the Cold War geopolitical spectrum. For instance, a well-known U.S. Senator described the Cuban dictatorship of Fidel Castro as admirable and worthy of praise while condemning the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet in Chile, while someone, from a different political party, also in the U.S. Senate, described the Chilean dictatorship as worthy of admiration and praise while damning the Cuban regime. The left/right divide only benefits dictatorships.

Along the same lines, the other component that breaks down what could be a vast coalition is the division created by trying to include multiple and sometimes even conflicting definitions of "human rights." At HRF we believe that the fundamental human rights outlined in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights are the basis of the most far-reaching coalition and it can unite individuals from across the political and ideological spectrum. In short: civil and political rights are the bedrock upon which the structure of freedom is built. Some political parties run for government on the platform of extending wide and free access to education or to healthcare, for instance. But no government should have to be running on whether or not due process should exist or the right to not worship, for instance.

We believe the HRF mission statement is a good summary of the principles that could create a working coalition across the political and ideological spectrum.

The second key outcome necessary is for individuals to specifically assist those living under authoritarianism. Democratic governments and state departments should not be the only ones providing assistance to dissidents, defectors, and activists. We believe in people helping people. Individuals in business and civil society should become more involved in this process, by helping to establish peer-to-peer networks with people living under authoritarian regimes. Whether it's helping with freedom of the press or political prisoner cases or direct support or connecting them with technology.

We may not be able to topple a dictator but we can assist individuals living in countries ruled by authoritarian regimes who are more than eager to do that job, peacefully, and non-violently.

It has worked.

And even in the cases where the odds are far more challenging, like in North Korea, we find that there are multiple projects that can assist in bringing down the tyrannical rule of the Kims and it is only a matter of time.

We take inspiration from the stone-cutter's credo and the image made famous by the journalist Jacob Riis who wrote: "Look at a stone cutter hammering away at his rock, perhaps a hundred times without as much as a crack showing in it. Yet at the hundred-and-first blow it will split in two, and I know it was not the last blow that did it, but all that had gone before."

I hope that my testimony has been helpful and stand ready to answer any questions you may have about HRF's positions.