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Resisting the Global Crackdown on Civil Society

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Civil society is increasingly coming under assault around the world, as authoritarian governments grow more bold and sophisticated in stifling independent groups that monitor elections, expose corruption, or otherwise give citizens a voice in how they are governed. In response, senior U.S. officials have reaffirmed their support for universal rights, including freedom of association, while mid-level officials have criticized specific abuses against civil society. However, only modest U.S. government efforts have dealt systematically with the global nature of the crackdown on civil society. This weak U.S. response to the crackdown hurts U.S. interests and undermines U.S. credibility abroad. The U.S. government needs to respond to the threats against civil society more forcefully.

To curb the global crackdown, the United States needs to systematically oppose efforts by authoritarian governments to control civic space, take vigorous political and diplomatic measures to support civil society organizations that come under threat, and get around government restrictions designed to isolate local organizations from the international community. Effective U.S. policy to defend civil society needs to respond comprehensively to the global nature of the crackdown and, at the same time, turn the tide in key countries where repression of civil society has significant regional repercussions. While bipartisan collaboration is critical to make such policy effective, a strong U.S. response to the global crackdown on civil society must begin in the White House.

Intensified Crackdown

Governments around the world are intensifying their crackdown on civil society. The [pushback against democracy](#), which began almost a decade ago, has grown more pervasive and pernicious. Authoritarian regimes are becoming more assertive in constraining civic space and bold in flouting international norms protecting freedom of association.

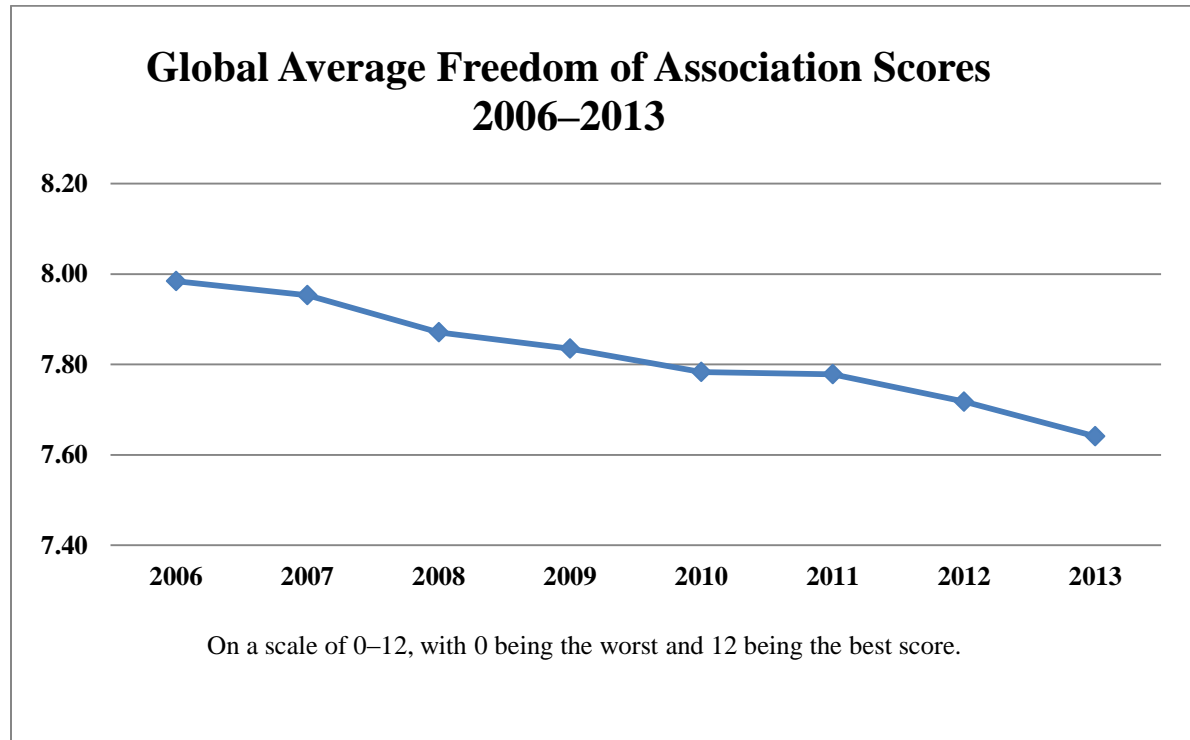
Fresh examples of this crackdown abound. In Egypt, a court in June shut down a German and four American non-governmental organizations (NGOs), including Freedom House, and convicted all of their 43 employees who were on trial for more than a year for operating without a license. By contrast, hardly any cases against security officials involved in the deaths of protesters have resulted in convictions. In addition, the government of President Mohamed Morsi, before it was deposed, was pushing a draft law that would tighten restrictions on NGOs.

In Russia, authorities have inspected hundreds of NGOs following the passage of a law that would brand NGOs as “foreign agents” if they engage in “political activity” while receiving foreign funding. The respected election monitoring organization Golos was fined and then suspended for failing to register as a “foreign agent.” A leading human rights group, For Human Rights, was forcibly evicted from its office and its director was beaten.

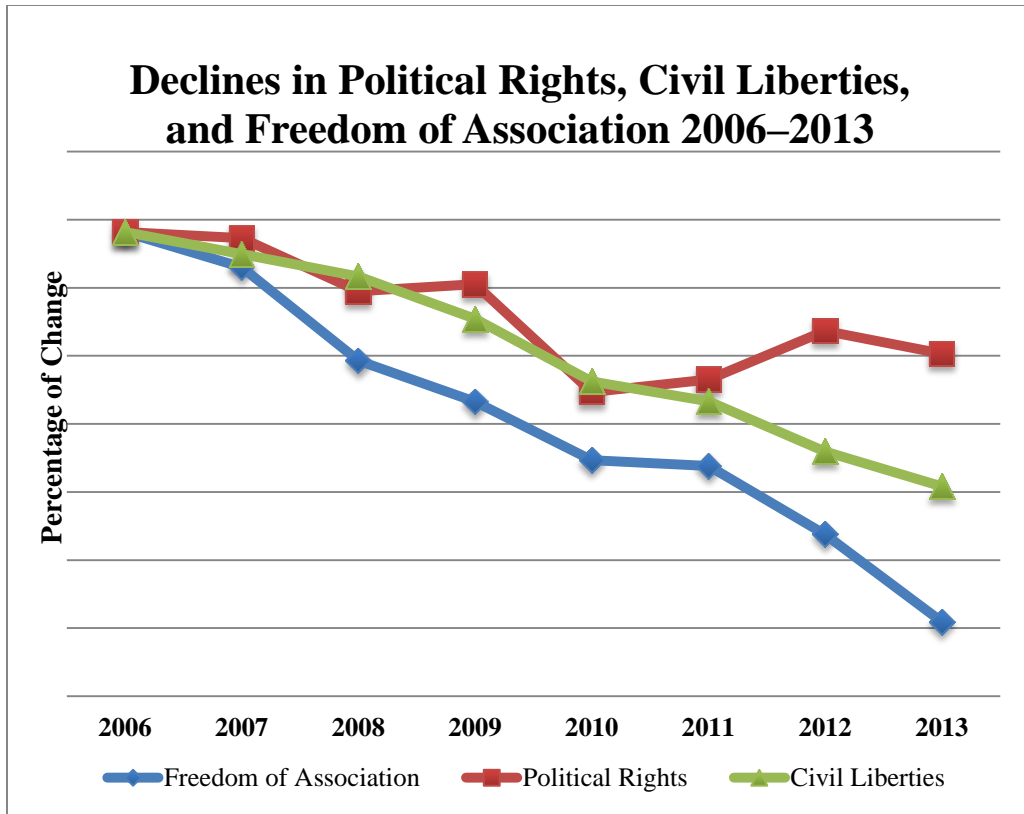
In Azerbaijan, authorities have broken up anti-government demonstrations, and seven activists from the youth movement NIDA are currently in prison awaiting trial on trumped up charges. Moreover, new restrictions on NGOs impose crippling fines for minor administration violations in receiving foreign funding.

Global Trends

These examples are just the latest steps in the steady deterioration in freedom of association over the past several years. The global average of *Freedom in the World* ratings for freedom of association has declined every year since 2006, with the exception of 2011, when it stayed the same (see graph below).



Freedom of association has declined more sharply than civil liberties overall and political rights (see graph below). This sharper decline suggests that authoritarian rulers are going further to constrain civil society than to block traditional political opposition. They are targeting groups that defend the rights of citizens, challenge abuses of power, expose electoral fraud, and mobilize public protests. Authoritarian rulers may have drawn the lesson from the 2011 Arab uprisings that civil society is a key driver of political change, particularly where opposition political parties are weak. Moreover, attacks on civil society at times serve to restrict political space in anticipation of upcoming elections, as in the case of Azerbaijan, which will hold a presidential election in mid-October.



Dozens of governments are misusing [laws to repress civil society](#), particularly to hinder the creation of civil society organizations, limit their activities, and constrain their funding. The misuse of laws is designed to provide a patina of legitimacy for repression.

Authoritarian governments often restrict foreign funding for civil society so that they can claim they are protecting their country from nefarious outside influences when in reality they are choking off vital resources for indigenous groups that check their abuses of power. In most countries outside of North America and Western Europe, civil society organizations face great difficulty in raising funds domestically, particularly for work aimed at strengthening democracy and human rights, because domestic donors risk serious reprisals. For example, Russia’s Federal Security Service has [targeted donors](#) of anti-corruption activist Alexei Navalny in the past and when he was [put on trial](#) earlier this year.

Legal restrictions, however, are only part of the story. Civil society [activists are harassed](#), attacked, and even murdered to stop them from carrying out their work and to intimidate others from pursuing similar efforts to stand up for citizens’ rights or take on entrenched interests.

The global crackdown is more than a pattern of abuses taking place within countries in different continents. It is also an international phenomenon that crosses borders and challenges multilateral institutions. Authoritarian regimes are [exporting repression](#). They are replicating each other’s worst practices and working together to silence democratic aspirations and quash dissent. They also are collaborating to water down accepted international human rights standards and weaken international institutions that protect human rights.

U.S. Interests

The global assault on civil society adversely affects U.S. interests in several ways. First, it undermines democracy and thereby contributes to instability. In the Arab world, for example, U.S. reliance on authoritarian rulers to preserve stability through repression is no longer tenable. The uprisings of 2011 shattered the brittle stability of repressive rule in several countries and put it in question elsewhere. Sharp social divisions, notably between Islamist and secular currents, have emerged, and they are unlikely to get resolved without violence outside of an inclusive, democratic process, which allows civil society to operate freely. Democratic systems channel political competition and citizen grievances into nonviolent processes, while authoritarian systems are designed to block off nonviolent avenues to express differences and consider political alternatives.

Civil society contributes directly to stability by encouraging citizens to address their concerns through democratic political processes, including elections. It also challenges abuses of power that fuel instability. For instance, civil society seeks to hold to account security officials who use arbitrary or excessive force against civilians, which tends to cause greater political polarization. Civil society also exposes corruption, which undercuts economic efficiency, provokes resentment in society, and often diverts significant portions of foreign aid from public goods to private gains.

Second, repression of civil society tends to hold back the emergence of more reliable international partners. Most U.S. allies are democratic, because alliances are often grounded in shared values, while the countries that pose the greatest challenges to U.S. interests invariably are authoritarian. U.S. relationships with authoritarian governments, even when friendly, are purely transactional; they extend only so far as each side's interests coincide. Authoritarian rulers often try to deflect the blame for their country's ills to alleged foreign plots and to silence their domestic critics by accusing civil society leaders of serving foreign interests. Civil society meanwhile seeks to promote constructive solutions to real problems, such as injustice and a dearth of economic opportunities, and to encourage positive interaction with the international community.

Third, the crackdown on civil society chips away at accepted international norms and thus begins to erode the international order, which is based to a significant extent on multilateral agreements and commitments. It undermines international standards for the freedoms of association and expression and degrades the rule of law. Countries that fail to uphold their international commitments to respect the freedoms of association and expression are more inclined to flout other international commitments, for instance to protect intellectual property or prevent arbitrary seizures of assets from foreign investment.

Fourth, the crackdown impedes a core component of modern U.S. diplomacy—building U.S. relations with the people of other countries, not just with their governments. U.S. leaders and diplomats can best serve U.S. interests by interacting with a broad cross-section of society in other countries, explaining American values and policies directly to people around the world, and fostering of direct links between different segments of U.S. society with their counterparts abroad. The tepid U.S. response to the crackdown on civil society allows the links between American and foreign societies to get cut off, reverts U.S. diplomacy to a focus on government-to-government relations, as was prevalent in the last century, and leaves the impression that the U.S. government does not care about the people in other countries and is content to deal only with foreign governments, regardless of how badly these governments treat their citizens. This impression damages U.S. credibility overseas.

Fifth, the brazen pushback against U.S. democracy assistance and the weak U.S. response create the perception that the United States is unwilling or unable to stand up for its interests, and even for its citizens. Several countries have [shut down U.S. foreign assistance programs](#) but faced little resistance from the U.S. government and few if any consequences. This pattern began with the raids on American NGO offices in Cairo in December 2011 and continued with the closure of U.S. and European democracy

organizations in the United Arab Emirates, the expulsion of the U.S. Agency for International Development from Russia and later from Bolivia, and most recently the convictions of NGO workers by a court in Cairo. The U.S. government's decisions to largely give in to these moves in Egypt, UAE, Russia, and Bolivia make it look weak.

The U.S. government frequently declares its support for citizens of other countries to exercise their fundamental rights, including the freedom of association, and those citizens often look to the United States for support. The tepid U.S. response to suppression of civil society leaves those citizens vulnerable and damages U.S. credibility in the eyes of both pro-democracy activists abroad and authoritarian governments.

Defending Civil Society

A vigorous and effective response to the global crackdown on civil society must begin in the White House. President Obama sets the direction for U.S. foreign policy, and the best measures to address the crackdown are in the hands of the executive. He has other foreign policy priorities, but neglect of the crackdown will do more to hinder than promote his other priorities, and it runs the risk of leaving the world less stable overall, more hostile to the United States, and more likely to challenge U.S. interests.

At the same time, bipartisan collaboration offers the best prospects to respond effectively to the global assault on civil society. While some Republicans may feel tempted to use this issue as a cudgel to clobber the Obama Administration, that would be counter-productive. There is support among key leaders of both parties in Congress for a policy of vigorously defending civil society abroad. Cross-party collaboration is critical to pursue such a policy and make it more robust, including to explain to the American public, which is growing fatigued by foreign engagement, how this policy promotes U.S. interests.

Effective U.S. policy to defend civil society needs both to respond in a systematic way to the global nature of the crackdown and to turn the tide in key countries where repression has significant regional repercussions. A global policy should address comprehensively a pattern of repressive practices that are replicated across countries and regions. It would consist of the following:

1. President Obama should meet with human rights defenders and civil society leaders on his overseas trips and in Washington. He should also speak out more often against specific human rights abuses, which he rarely does. The lack of personal engagement conveys the message that his priorities lie elsewhere. The defense of fundamental rights abroad is literally delegated to others in his Administration but then largely ignored and dismissed by governments around the world because of the silence from the Oval Office.
2. Secretary of State Kerry should collaborate with like-minded foreign ministers to address the suppression of civil society. High-level and coordinated multilateral responses to crackdowns on civil society tend to have the greatest impact and are critical to uphold international norms on freedom of association.
3. Secretary Kerry should put human rights on the agenda in all of his meetings with leaders of governments that commit serious human rights violations. He also should meet with human rights defenders and civil society leaders on all of his overseas trips to countries with authoritarian governments, so that he conveys consistent U.S. interest in the work of these activists and makes outreach to them a routine, even if unwelcome, expectation of host governments.
4. The Obama Administration should nominate senior State Department officials, particularly Assistant Secretaries for regional bureaus and Ambassadors to key countries, who have the expertise and commitment to support human rights. The U.S. Senate should insist on such expertise and commitment in its confirmation hearings. Support for civil society abroad cannot be left entirely to the Assistant Secretary for Democracy and Human Rights.

5. Secretary Kerry should issue explicit guidance for embassies around the world, and create incentives for foreign service officers, to engage regularly with civil society, including to monitor trials of dissidents and publicly criticize human rights violations.
6. Congress should continue to hold hearings on the human rights conditions in key countries and regions and press the Administration to respond vigorously to human rights abuses.
7. Wherever U.S. democracy assistance programs are shut down or impeded, U.S. assistance should be resumed and even increased through alternative avenues, such as intermediaries or off-shore operations.
8. The Secretary of Defense, senior U.S. military commanders, and Secretary of the Treasury should raise human rights concerns in their discussions with repressive governments and thereby convey that human rights are a matter of importance for the entire Administration.

In addition to a global policy, the U.S. government should take country-specific measures to defend civil society in key countries where crackdowns are underway or where there are opportunities to roll back restrictions on civic space. Priority should be given to countries where the United States exercises significant leverage, but the United States should address the crackdown in other countries as well, to keep human rights on the agenda even when U.S. relations with a country are complex or tense. The list of key countries could be quite long. To give just a few examples, the United States should pursue the following country-specific initiatives:

- **Egypt:** reconsider delivery of aid to the Egyptian government until the slate is wiped clean for all of the 43 convicted NGO workers and their organizations are allowed to reopen and operate freely; conduct a top-to-bottom review of the U.S. relationship with Egypt—including U.S. assistance and support for Egypt’s requested IMF loan—before any further aid is appropriated; and resume aid delivery only after Egypt has adopted constitutional amendments that protect the rights of all Egyptians and held free and fair elections.
- **Bahrain:** provide dedicated assistance to pro-democracy activists in Bahrain and draw up a contingency plan for basing the Fifth Fleet, which would signal U.S. concern about the instability driven by the Bahraini government’s crackdown on peaceful protests and refusal to compromise with the opposition.
- **Russia:** add Russian officials involved in the current crackdown to the “Magnitsky” visa-ban list and encourage European countries to adopt a “Magnitsky” law to deny visas and freeze the assets of Russian officials responsible for human rights abuses.
- **Ethiopia:** make U.S. aid to the Ethiopian government conditional on the ability for civil society to operate freely, and encourage other donor governments to do the same (the Charities and Societies law, passed in 2009, has cut off funding for human rights organizations in the country).

The intensifying assault on civil society around the world calls for a firm international response, led by the United States. U.S. resolve is critical to defend civil society and thereby advance U.S. interests and credibility abroad.

ISSUES: Civil Society, U.S. Foreign Policy, Freedom of Association, Freedom of Expression, Human Rights Defense

REGIONS: Sub-Saharan Africa, Middle East, Central and Eastern Europe/Eurasia

COUNTRIES: Ethiopia, Egypt, Russia, Bahrain

Freedom House is an independent watchdog organization that supports democratic change, monitors the status of freedom around the world, and advocates for democracy and human rights.

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