

Extension of Remarks
HON. FRANK R. WOLF
of Virginia
Thursday, July 7, 2011

Mr. WOLF. Mr. Speaker, I submit for the record a copy of my Egypt trip report.

Purpose:

On June 26-28 I visited Egypt to meet with U.S. and host government officials and key civil society actors, specifically to address human rights and religious freedom concerns, especially during this critical time of transition.

Meetings:

I met with U.S. Ambassador Margaret Scobey and received a modified country team brief from embassy staff. I spoke with U.S./Western print correspondents and saw Tahrir Square—site of recent pro-democracy protests.

I met with nearly a dozen Christian, Muslim, Baha'i, and youth activists, including a leading evangelical minister, Coptic youth leader and prominent Baha'i blogger.

I also discussed the country's transition with political activists, including 2005 presidential candidate and former political prisoner Ayman Nour, who is again seeking the presidency.

I discussed interfaith dialogue with Sheikh Al-Azhar Ahmed Al-Tayyeb, the leading scholar in Sunni Islam, and met with Muslim Brotherhood official Essam El-Errian to caution the group to respect religious freedom.

I worshiped in a Coptic Orthodox Church and visited St. Mary's Church in Imbaba (a Cairo suburb) which had been destroyed by radical Islamists on May 7. I also met with a woman who runs an orphanage and social services organization for the Christian "zabaleen" (trash collectors) in Cairo.

I met with Deputy Foreign Minister Wafaa Bassim and other representatives of the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and raised concerns about human rights and the prospects of a transition to a true democracy.

In my meetings with Egyptian government officials, I mentioned that this year I had introduced bipartisan legislation, H.R. 440, (which now has 75 cosponsors) that would create a Special Envoy position at the State Department to focus specifically on the challenges faced by religious minorities in key countries in the Middle East, including Egypt. The legislation was introduced in January, prior to the political unrest in Egypt, but has arguably never been more needed. Ancient religious minority communities, among them Coptic Christians, are important moderating influences and are critical to the future of a democratic and pluralistic Egypt.

I met with representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) including the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and International Republican Institute (IRI).

Human Rights and Religious Freedom:

Coptic Orthodox and other Christians told me that they feared sectarian violence in the current political vacuum, and were concerned about continued discrimination in government hiring and building churches. They said that they welcomed the Government of Egypt's announced intention to draft a Unified Places of Worship Law, but cautioned that the few details that had emerged thus far indicate that the draft needs much work before it genuinely puts mosques and churches on equal footing.

In my meetings with Baha'i leaders we discussed the community's continued difficulties in securing government documents like birth and marriage certificates. I intend to pursue this matter further with the Egyptian Government, pressing them to rescind the 1960 decree that closed Baha'i assemblies and seized their assets.

In my meetings with Christian and secular Muslim democracy activists, I was informed that Islamist elements in Egypt seek an Iran-like theocratic state. Some interlocutors worried that the Egyptian Army favors Muslim Brothers and Salafists. Many agreed that if Islamists were to win in the upcoming elections they would allow "one man, one vote, one time," thereby making their electoral victory irreversible.

While meeting with senior representatives of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) I sought to press them on their intentions. I raised concerns about the application of shariah law, especially as it relates to the rights of minorities, and made it clear that my concerns were shared by many in Washington. Freedom-loving people the world over should be very concerned if the MB comes to power in Egypt. We must not close our eyes to their stated plans.

Democratic Transition:

Some Egyptian activists and most religious freedom advocates were pessimistic about the transition to date and prospects for a free, tolerant, and democratic government after elections.

Several of these activists stressed that the best way to counter Islamists in the short run is to first draft a constitution and delay elections until democratic parties have formed and become operational. One activist went so far as to say that he was 80 percent sure Egypt would become an Islamist state akin to Iran unless the current transition process and timeline is altered.

Activists also said that secular, pro-democracy parties need to take additional steps to get organized and build support across the sectarian divide. One human rights activist underscored the long-term importance of secular education and more interaction between Christian and Muslim youth.

Recommendations:

In light of the meetings I had and the insights I gained, I came away with a number of broad-based policy recommendations:

- The U.S. Government should encourage the Egyptian Government to temporarily delay parliamentary elections, currently scheduled for September. Under the Mubarak regime free speech and freedom of assembly were curtailed, sectarian divisions were stoked and the press was restricted—some of these issues remain under the current transitional government and are not conducive to a healthy electoral process. In fact, at present, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and remnants of the former ruling party are best positioned for victory, in part because they are better organized and funded. We must recognize that elections are but a component of a true democracy and guard against the impulse to move too swiftly in a direction that would likely guarantee an MB victory.
- When the elections are held independent, international election monitors must be present and must be granted unfettered access to polling stations, etc. In my meetings with the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs I stressed that the credibility of any future election, whenever it takes place, would hinge on the involvement and presence of international observers. The importance of independent monitors and observers was underscored during my meetings with NDI and IRI. Their insight and election expertise is invaluable.
- The United States must seriously consider conditioning U.S. foreign assistance, specifically military assistance, to Egypt. Since the Camp David Peace Accords, Egypt has received over \$60 billion in U.S. foreign assistance—the second largest overall recipient of such funding. Given the Mubarak regime’s human rights and religious freedom abuses, I have long believed this assistance should be conditioned on improvements in these areas. I understand that Egypt is a proud country with a rich history. However, at this time of historic transition in Egypt and tight budgetary times at home, U.S. taxpayer dollars ought not be given to a government that will persecute its own people. Aid to Egypt should be conditioned upon the government respecting and upholding universally recognized human rights norms. This is especially important as Egypt moves toward crafting a new constitution. It is imperative that this constitution is fully secular and include, among other things, religious freedom protections. Ultimately, foreign assistance, especially of this magnitude, is a key leverage point and should be used accordingly, particularly with the Supreme Council of the Egyptian Armed Forces (SCAF).

Acknowledgements:

I would like to thank the U.S. embassy personnel, outgoing Ambassador Margaret Scobey, Peter Shea, my control officer, and Liz Colton for their assistance in making this trip possible and for their dedicated service to their country.

I’d also like to acknowledge the good work of the press in Egypt, some of whom I had the opportunity to meet. At a time of such monumental and rapid change they clearly had a read on the national pulse and their reporting of events in real time is critical.

I would also like to thank the many civil society representatives I met, but for security reasons have opted not to mention by name, who gave a candid and courageous assessment of the challenges facing their country.

Conclusion:

The Egyptian people have endured much over the years. The State Department's annual human rights report released in April found the following:

“The government limited citizens' right to change their government and extended a state of emergency that has been in place almost continuously since 1967. Security forces used unwarranted lethal force and tortured and abused prisoners and detainees, in most cases with impunity. Prison and detention center conditions were poor. Security forces arbitrarily arrested and detained individuals, in some cases for political purposes, and kept them in prolonged pretrial detention. The executive branch exercised control over and pressured the judiciary. The government partially restricted freedom of expression. The government's respect for freedoms of assembly, association, and religion was poor, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) continued to face restrictions.”

In the face of decades of human rights and religious freedom abuses under the Mubarak regime, successive U.S. administrations, including the Obama administration, failed to advocate for those whose voices were being silenced. Many pro-democracy activists and religious minorities that I spoke with while in Egypt felt abandoned by the West.

At this historic time of transition, we must not make that mistake again. While there is a palpable sense of anticipation and even hope about what the future might hold for the Egyptian people, the outcome is far from guaranteed.

There are reliable reports of human rights abuses and political repression following Mubarak's resignation. For example, a recently released Congressional Research Service report indicated that:

“The SCAF has warned news organizations that it is illegal to criticize the military in the press. A military court sentenced a blogger (Maikel Nabil) to three years in prison for insulting the military. Others have criticized the SCAF over press reports that female detainees in military custody were subject to "virginity tests" by doctors.”

Given the nature and extent of U.S. assistance to Egypt over the years, the U.S. military has developed good relations with the Egyptian military and we should leverage those ties as Egypt looks to transition from military to civilian rule. It will be critical for Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, among others, to engage with the SCAF.

Ultimately, I believe that the majority of Egyptians of all faiths want democracy. The question is will it be taken away from them after a single election?

Their yearning for true freedom and democracy must not be underestimated. We have a responsibility to stand with them and help them realize their aspirations.