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BEFORE THE HOUSE FOREIGN AFFAIRS SUBCOMMITTEE ON  
THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA  
"THE STRUGGLE FOR CIVIL SOCIETY IN EGYPT"  
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Madam Chairwoman and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to testify today about the criminal convictions handed down to me and other employees of the National Democratic Institute who – along with counterparts from the International Republican Institute, Freedom House, the International Center for Journalists and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation – were put on trial in Egypt for working for NGOs and were sentenced to prison terms ranging from one to five years. I also want to thank you, Madam Chairwoman, Mr. Connolly, and many of your colleagues for the continued statements of support that you have issued for those of us who must now carry the burden of these unjust convictions. And I also wish to thank the many Egyptian civic organizations and political leaders who have voiced their support –

especially those for whom public statements resulted in charges of their own.

On June 4, 2013, I awoke to find that I had been found guilty in absentia by an Egyptian court for exerting – and I quote – “a new form of control and domination.” The judges claimed that, “One cannot imagine...that the USA or other countries supporting the Zionist entity has any interest or a genuine desire for establishing a real democracy in Egypt.”

This inflammatory rhetoric contradicts the budgetary realities of Egypt, which currently receives billions of dollars in foreign assistance each year. It also contradicts the reality of our programs, which included election observation approved by the Government of Egypt as well as nonpartisan voter education, civil society development, women’s candidate training and long-term political party strengthening for more than 50 registered political parties. Thousands of Egyptians from every region of the country participated in our programs. We have been completely open and transparent, having provided written and verbal reports of our activities to the Egyptian authorities, as well as taking

every measure to fulfill all of the registration requirements with the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs upon opening our Cairo office in 2005. There can be little doubt that this prosecution and subsequent verdict had the specific goal of dramatically reducing, and perhaps even effectively eliminating, international support for independent civil society in Egypt.

My "crime" was operating an unlicensed branch of an international organization and receiving funds from the United States Government without the approval of the Egyptian government. The Congressionally appropriated funds were provided by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (DRL).

This unjust verdict has been incredibly disruptive for individuals convicted. Some colleagues have lost jobs because the country in which they were assigned to work denied them entry or their prospective employer feared that the verdict would impact their ability to work. Some have been detained by police in foreign countries while traveling due to outdated red notices issued by Egypt through INTERPOL.

The initial feelings of shock and dismay quickly gave rise to concerns about my career and family. Although I grew up in Los Angeles, California, the daughter of Middle Eastern and European immigrants, I went to university in Lebanon and worked in the Middle East for the past 10 years – seven of them in Egypt. I built a life there. When charges were filed against us and we were told to leave Egypt, there was no time to bid goodbye to that life, the Egyptians I worked with and the many participants I had come to count as friends. Now, knowing I may never return still creates a deep ache in my heart.

This verdict separates me from my family as well – you see my parents retired in the Middle East where several family members remain. Others convicted in the same NGO trial are separated from children, parents and immediate family. And we are only 43 stories – international human rights groups estimate that somewhere between 16,000 and 41,000 individuals have been imprisoned in Egypt since June of 2013 when our verdicts were handed down. Thousands more have lost their lives. Countless families are affected.

When our offices were raided in December of 2011, I remember NDI's President Kenneth Wollack saying that it was possible we were, in effect, canaries in a coal mine – a warning of even worse things to come. The trials against secular civic activists, detentions of former members of parliament and political party leaders, and the recent conviction of the journalists in Egypt serve as near constant reminders of the most stressful aspects of our prosecution. These include the trauma of the armed raids, the abrupt work stoppage, an intense government-led media campaign accusing us of being spies and suggesting that our Egyptian colleagues should be put to death, the hours of interrogation by Egyptian judges, and an 18-month trial resulting in felony convictions without a shred of evidence. Now we have a jail sentence and travel restrictions that could follow us for the rest of our lives.

The Government of Egypt is reportedly considering a new draft NGO law that is far more restrictive than the one under which we were charged and convicted. While not yet final, it contains language that requires Egyptian civil society groups to receive prior approval from the government before conducting domestic fundraising efforts or accepting funding from international donors. The draft law also prohibits any

public opinion research and cooperation with a foreign association, organization or agency without prior notification of the Ministry of Social Solidarity. Those who are deemed to have violated this provision risk one year imprisonment and a fine of 100,000EGP, or approximately \$14,000.

International NGOs like ours would still be subject to the prior approval of multiple government ministries, including the state security apparatus, before registration is granted, and even afterward be subject to constant monitoring and vulnerable to charges of violating the law due to the overly broad language included in the draft. For example, registration could be terminated for any activity that the government deemed to “threaten national unity.”

Democratic transitions follow no set pattern, and no transition looks the same as another. However, every society that transitions to a more pluralistic, participatory political system has active public discourse and debate and vibrant political activity that directly engages a diverse cross-section of citizens in shaping policies of the country.

Our verdict, the raids on NGOs, the trials of journalists, the protest law and the proposed NGO law create an opposite effect and directly contradict the promises of freedom of expression and association, and a

free press guaranteed in the 2014 Egyptian Constitution as well as numerous conventions and treaties to which Egypt is a signatory.

I am proud to work for an organization that supports democratic development and democratic institutions in nearly 70 countries around the world. I have seen first-hand the difference it makes in a society – especially in the area of long-term economic and social advancement that improves the quality of life for the majority of citizens and contributes to a more peaceful existence.

The nature of our work often requires us to travel to far-flung corners of the Earth to work with activists and governments that aspire to the same rights-based, inclusive political system that we enjoy, as do millions of others in every region of the world. This work also requires one to be an optimist and I believe that there is still room for optimism where Egypt is concerned. There is still a great hunger for democracy in Egypt – especially among the youth who now recognize that it will take more than street demonstrations to create a more pluralistic and democratic system. Although we have not had a presence in Egypt for more than two years, we continue to receive e-mails almost daily requesting assistance.

More than 48,000 copies of NDI's Arabic language publications have been downloaded in Egypt since we left the country, and more than 120,000 unique visitors have used the Institute's Arabic website – 85 percent of them from Egypt. Democratic activists in Egypt do exist and they have every intention of working for genuine political reform. They deserve international support.

I believe strongly in this work and in the democratic process. And despite the added risk that this verdict brings -- it is still work worth doing. With all its human faults and failings, the democratic process is an ideal worth upholding and very much in U.S. strategic interests.

The fact that this committee is having this hearing and that I was invited to share my story speaks volumes about how our system values individual citizens. It is my hope that one day, every Egyptian knows what this feels like and that I will be able to return to Egypt and share in their joy.

Thank you, Madam Chairwoman and members of the Subcommittee.