

Opening Statement
The Honorable Ami Bera
Chairman, Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, and Nonproliferation
House Foreign Affairs Committee

Stemming a Receding Tide: Human Rights and Democratic Values in Asia
Tuesday, September 22, 2020
10:00 am EDT

I want to thank Ranking Member Yoho, the members of this subcommittee, our witnesses, and members of the public for joining us at today's hearing.

Last year, under the leadership of Congressman Sherman, this subcommittee held a series of hearings examining human rights in Asia. These hearings reflected the longstanding interest and importance that both this Subcommittee and the Full Committee hold for human rights .

Human rights and democratic governance have not only been central to the concerns of Congress, they have traditionally been core to the conduct of American foreign policy. After all, one of the greatest strengths of the United States lies in our values, including our respect for democracy and human rights. As I often tell our friends and partners, we will not always be perfect but we should at least try. The United States possesses its own faults and shortcomings when it comes human rights and living up to our values: from disparate treatment of communities of color and immigrants, to institutions increasingly influenced more by ideology than the rule of law. We should acknowledge and welcome that criticism, just as we seek to uphold these values at home and abroad. That is part of what being a mature democracy is about.

In 2020, these values and rights, more than ever, are under threat. Across Asia we see examples of the threats of arbitrary arrest and detention, the right to peaceably assemble, equal protection for minority groups, freedom of expression. Such freedoms which should be fundamental to all people on earth have been curtailed dramatically by different countries in Asia in the past few years. Unfortunately, we have witnessed examples of a limitation of these rights by authoritarian regimes *and* democracies alike.

Since I took the gavel of this Subcommittee in December, I've been watching the countries in my portfolio very closely. I have spoken with democracy leaders in Hong Kong about the devastating impacts of the implementation of the Chinese national security law. Last month I co-hosted a briefing with the Oversight Subcommittee on National Security to learn about the egregious and growing threats to minority populations in Xinjiang, China. This summer I led a hearing on the humanitarian crisis of the Rohingya in Burma and Bangladesh. Last year, I visited Malaysia in the wake of their elections and know that the country is undergoing its own challenges on that front. I continue to be concerned about democratic backsliding elsewhere in the region, and the role that China may play in abetting these trends.

Finally, South Asia is an extremely diverse region with minority populations that have contributed greatly to those societies. Like in the United States and elsewhere, I believe democracies' strength lies in that diversity and respect for pluralism. It's imperative that the

United States be consistent in its message that being a democracy is not simply majority rule, but also respect for those who may not have supported you. It is a lesson we must demonstrate here in the United States as well.”

These human rights and governance challenges have been exacerbated by COVID-19. Nations have enacted public health measures that may be designed to limit the spread of COVID-19, but which, intentionally or unintentionally, limit civil liberties and individual rights.

This is what this hearing will examine: what is the status of human rights and democracy in Asia? What tools does the United States have available to convince countries to respect these values and rights, particularly beyond the use of sanctions?

I also hope our witnesses will also address the role democracies can play in advocating for human rights and democratic values, and convincing countries in the region to respect them.

I look forward to their testimony. With that, I turn to my good friend, the Ranking Member, Mr. Yoho.