

JOINT STATEMENT  
HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL 31  
AGENDA ITEM 3  
March 11, 2016

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION, IN THE CONTEXT OF  
PEACEFUL TRANSITIONS WITHIN DEMOCRACIES

[Please note that a shorter version of this statement was delivered, due to time constraints, but this full version is posted.]

Thank you, Mr. Vice President.

I have the honor to deliver this statement on behalf of a group of 66 states from all regions.

A key feature of democracies, new and old, is that at regular intervals they undergo peaceful transitions from one elected government to a newly elected government.

Respect for universal human rights is critical, including during peaceful transitions within democracies; today we would like to highlight one such right: freedom of expression. As former Philippine President Corazon Aquino put it, “Freedom of expression – in particular, freedom of the press – guarantees popular participation in the decisions and actions of government, and popular participation is the essence of [our] democracy.”

We reaffirm our obligation regarding freedom of expression as set forth in Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which includes the right of everyone to hold opinions without interference, as well as the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing, or in print, in the form of art or through any other media of their choice. It is a key component of democratic governance, as the achievement of participatory decision-making processes is unattainable without adequate access to information.

In turn this right is intrinsically linked to the rights to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, peaceful assembly and association and the right to participate in public affairs, all of which underpin the vibrant democratic life of a country. Societies are more stable and prosperous when the right to freedom of expression, as well as other human rights, are respected.

Freedom of expression is a fundamental pillar for building a democratic society, and is essential in supporting the peaceful transition of political power. Citizens use this fundamental freedom to tell incumbent governments what they would like to see accomplished. Journalists and media workers use freedom of expression to write, broadcast, and televise stories that help citizens make educated political choices and hold those they have elected accountable.

The right to freedom of opinion and expression is a universal right: Freedom of opinion and expression applies to all persons equally. It needs to be protected regardless of frontiers and for everyone, regardless of who they are and where they live. It must be respected and protected equally online as well as offline.

We welcome actions taken by states undergoing transitions in democratically elected leaders to protect freedom of expression and ensure access to the Internet and telecommunications networks. States have the primary obligation to protect and ensure the right to freedom of opinion and expression, in accordance with their human rights obligations and commitments.

We also welcome the efforts of UN entities, such as OHCHR, the special procedures, and the UN Democracy Fund, to promote human rights and democracy.

We encourage all states to ensure the freedom and independence of media, which are fundamental for democracy. We encourage all states to protect and promote pluralism, tolerance, and freedom of thought and expression and to enhance dialogue and debate.

We look forward to further discussion in this Council of the important relationship between freedom of expression and democratic transitions.

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The following sixty-six states signed the U.S. led statement on FOE.

Albania, Andorra, Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Canada, Colombia, Costa Rica, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, El Salvador, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Guinea, Hungary, Iceland, India, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Macedonia, Malta, Mexico, Moldova, Monaco, Mongolia, Namibia, The Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Republic of Korea, Romania, St. Kitts and Nevis, San Marino, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Tunisia, Turkey, Ukraine, United Kingdom, United States, Uruguay

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