



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

45th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

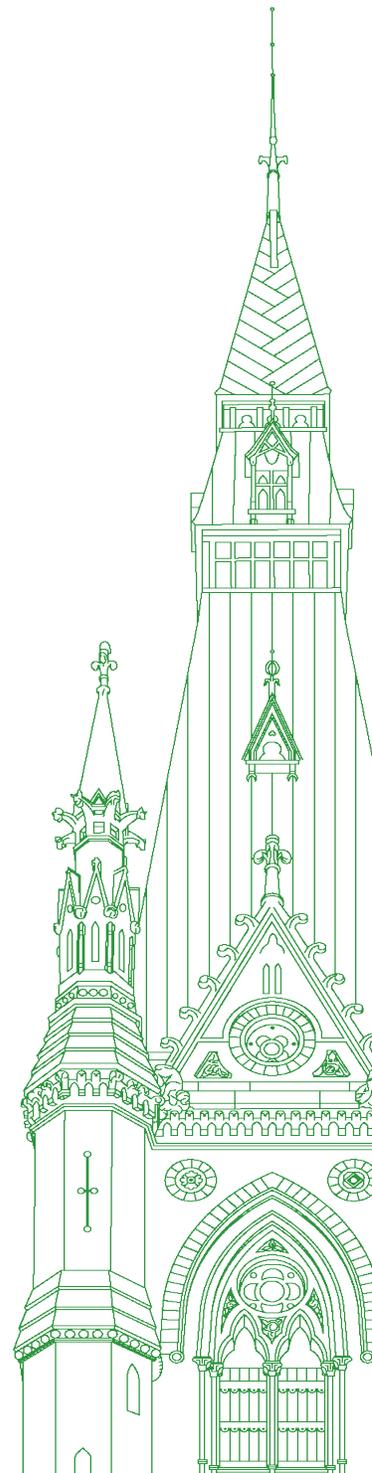
Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 011

PUBLIC PART ONLY - PARTIE PUBLIQUE SEULEMENT

Monday, February 9, 2026



Chair: Fayçal El-Khoury

Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

Monday, February 9, 2026

• (1535)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Fayçal El-Khoury (Laval—Les Îles, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 11 of the House of Commons Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted on Monday, January 26, the subcommittee is meeting on its study of the current situation of democracy and human rights defenders around the world.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the Standing Orders. Members are attending in person in the room and remotely using the Zoom application.

[*English*]

I would like to make a few comments for the benefit of the witnesses and the members.

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. For those participating by video conference, click on the microphone icon to activate your mic and please mute yourself when you are not speaking.

For those on Zoom, at the bottom of your screen you can select the appropriate channel for interpretation: floor, English or French. For those in the room, you can use the earpiece to select the desired channel.

I remind you that all comments should be addressed through the chair.

[*Translation*]

I would now like to welcome the witnesses.

[*English*]

As individuals, we have Mirja Trilsch, professor, and Chris Yonke, political and strategic affairs adviser.

From Demos Kratos, we have Ryota Jonen, founding member.

From the Iranian-Canadian Cultural Society of Vancouver Island, we have Taajbakhsh Daliran, founder, and Kian Pakdel, founder.

From the National Democratic Institute, we have Dr. Tamara Cofman Wittes, president.

From the Parliamentary Centre, we have Ivo Balinov, executive director of programs, and Marci Surkes, vice-chair of the board.

Before I start the round of questions, I would like to bring to your attention that this committee did a lot of study...

We will suspend for a few seconds until we get translation.

• (1540)

(Pause)

• (1540)

The Chair: This committee has done several studies regarding Mr. Jimmy Lai and how he was held hostage in a prison. There were several studies with a lot of emotion. I believe we have a motion on the floor today regarding this issue. I would like to invite Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe to speak to the motion.

You have the floor.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe (Lac-Saint-Jean, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair. It won't take long.

I understand that consultation took place among the members and that everyone agreed that the following motion should be adopted swiftly—and even without a vote, so by unanimous consent.

The motion reads as follows:

That the Subcommittee on International Human Rights condemn the 20-year prison sentence imposed on former pro-democracy media mogul Jimmy Lai by the Hong Kong authorities and reiterate its call for his immediate release.

[*English*]

The Chair: Do I have consensus from the members?

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

Before we start with the questions and answers, I would like to give each of the witnesses five minutes for their elocution. We would like to start with Madame Mirja Trilsch, professor.

Madame, you have the floor for five minutes. Please try to respect the time, because we have a lot of witnesses.

[*Translation*]

Mirja Trilsch (Professor, As an Individual): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

One of the most effective ways to undermine human rights is to silence human rights defenders. When the voices of those who speak out against human rights violations and hold perpetrators accountable are stifled, it not only gives free rein to abuse, but also undermines democracy.

Attacks on human rights defenders are hardly new. What is particularly alarming in the current situation is the shrinking of the public space for human rights advocacy, as well as the destruction of mechanisms designed to protect human rights defenders.

The strategies used to attack human rights defenders are well known: intimidation, surveillance, threats, arbitrary imprisonment and assassination. To lend themselves an air of legitimacy, perpetrators also resort to criminalization—i.e., prosecution—either by labelling human rights work as terrorism, slander, or incitement to violence, or by making false accusations based on fabricated evidence, such as tax evasion or drug trafficking.

In addition to formal criminalization, there's also informal criminalization, which involves penalizing defenders by discriminating against them in terms of housing, employment, or health care. This phenomenon is particularly widespread against women and LGBT rights defenders.

Finally, outright suppression of certain types of speech is becoming increasingly common. Censorship is on the rise, whether it be banning research topics in universities, such as studies on gender and sexuality or discrimination, or blocking certain content on the Internet, such as rights organizations' websites.

So what can be done to defend human rights defenders? There is little recourse for victims. Opportunities to find refuge elsewhere are very limited. The diplomatic route is possible, but not easily accessible.

The UQAM International Human Rights Clinic has often had to come to the rescue of its partners. We have therefore turned to international mechanisms: the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, which can issue provisional protection measures, and the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, who can intervene directly with states.

These international mechanisms, both universal and regional, play an essential role in protecting human rights defenders. The United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders even explicitly provides for the right to communicate with intergovernmental organizations. However, those mechanisms are under threat themselves.

On the one hand, the authoritarian drift south of the border has severely affected their funding. At the United Nations, for example, treaty committees are finding their sessions cancelled, field visits are being cut back, and translation services have been scrapped. Currently, only the English website of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights will be updated. Ensuring the funding of international mechanisms for the protection of rights and their defenders must be a priority for states.

On the other hand, and this is almost unheard of, the mandate holders working within these institutions are themselves the targets of attacks and are facing to terrorist-level sanctions. Their assets are

frozen and their credit cards cancelled. International solidarity and the protection of these defenders are essential to keeping international mechanisms functional.

Could we do better here at home? Some countries have adopted laws to protect human rights defenders. There is even a model law proposed by the International Service for Human Rights that calls for the creation of a national protection mechanism that would, among other things, allow for physical protection measures.

Canada would undoubtedly benefit from such legislation. On the one hand, human rights defenders in Canada are not immune to attacks, particularly women, LGBT defenders and defenders in exile. On the other hand, the proliferation of sexist, racist, homophobic, transphobic and even fascist rhetoric raises fears that the situation will deteriorate. Adopting legislation and creating a national mechanism to protect human rights defenders would send a powerful signal that attacks against rights defenders will not be tolerated in Canada and would establish Canada as an example for other countries to follow.

• (1545)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Trilisch. You stayed well within your speaking time, and I thank you for that.

[English]

Now I would like to invite Mr. Chris Yonke to take the floor for five minutes.

The floor is yours.

Chris Yonke (Political and Strategic Affairs Adviser, As an Individual): Honourable members of the committee and the House, ladies and gentlemen, I'm appearing today to discuss a growing movement by experienced Canadian practitioners in international development who cannot sit idly by as human rights and democratic development erode globally under the changing priorities of democratic governments.

Global democracy is at a breaking point, with 72% of the world living under autocratic regimes. Simply put, Canada can do more in this space. Strengthening democratic institutions abroad is significantly more cost-effective than managing the inevitable fallout of authoritarianism, such as violent conflict, economic volatility and mass displacement.

The reality is that authoritarians are quick to take advantage of situations. In July, Russia announced an intention to launch a \$1-billion-plus organization, somewhat modelled after USAID, to support Russian interests. China's belt and road initiative is a comprehensive plan that will put China at the centre of international trade. The first half of 2025 saw the highest engagement ever. While stable democracies take a wait-and-see approach, others are moving fast to fill the void.

Canada, like our NATO allies, is not immune to the effects of foreign interference. Information manipulation, attempting to influence elections and, in some cases, intimidation have all been noted in recent commission reports and domestic media.

To spark dialogue among Canadians who have experienced working in democratic governance both domestically and abroad, a group of experts and academics formed naturally out of a concern for global democratic governance. In January a meeting was held with over 25 Canadian practitioners whose collective development experience exceeds at least 140 years to discuss and propose ways for Canada to strengthen its support and funding for domestic and international democratic resilience. It includes some of the best minds in Canada's domestic CSOs supporting our democracy, current and former implementers of major global projects, founders of international initiatives and leading government advisers. For clarity, we specifically ensured that we had democracy practitioners from across the political spectrum to find a path forward.

Participants recognized the need for Canada to urgently build the systems and infrastructure to support democratic resilience. Global circumstances have turned what once was a "want" for enhanced democratic governance programming into a "need". Canada must act in building alliances and partnerships that will benefit the country economically, create more resilient democratic societies and counter disparate challenges.

I will offer some observations. On global security and trade, Canada's support for global democratic resilience can be closely tied to economic, trade and security efforts. Rule of law, transparency and anti-corruption are practical and enabling conditions for stable economic partnerships. Canada must play a larger role in supporting fellow NATO member states, especially in eastern Europe, that face relentless foreign interference.

Political consensus is imperative. Any efforts to enhance Canada's work in this field would require broad consensus among the parties.

On countering authoritarianism, democracy engagement acts as a vital counterweight as Canada enters deeper relationships with illiberal partners and defends against authoritarian narratives.

Finally, on the domestic-international knowledge link, participants linked democratic resilience abroad with resilience at home.

There are some options going forward that we're still discussing. One is the creation in the future of an independent, non-partisan Canadian endowment for security and democracy, a non-partisan fund to bolster global democratic resilience that will support technical assistance, education and information sharing.

The second is to advocate to build a new coalition of democracy-supporting states. Canada's diversity positions us to lead globally a democracy support compact coordinating international democratic efforts.

The third is to call for the establishment of an ambassador and a strengthening of the democratic resilience program. This is an office that can champion global efforts. These offices have existed in the past—for example, with religious freedoms.

The fourth is to support both domestic and international democratic resilience.

Our group, which came together organically, is finalizing recommendations. We look forward to sharing those with you soon.

Overall, we cannot sit idly by, hoping a neighbour will do the work abroad that will benefit our Canadian family. It's time to use the resources we have to support our own economic growth and provide greater democratic security here and for our partners abroad.

Mr. Chairman and the committee, thank you for your time. I look forward to discussing more during the questions.

• (1550)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Yonke.

I would like to invite Mr. Ryota Jonen to take the floor for five minutes, please.

Ryota Jonen (Founding Member, Demos Kratos): Thank you, Mr. Chair and members of the subcommittee.

Mr. Chair, you mentioned that the son of Jimmy Lai was here in front of your committee two years ago. I'm very thankful that you initiated this motion to express solidarity with Jimmy Lai. That's what I think this subcommittee is about.

I have worked for 25 years, supporting democracy movements around the world. I worked at the National Endowment for Democracy in Washington, D.C., for more than two decades, working with both Republicans and Democrats, uniting their support around democracy and freedom against autocratic governments like Russia and China. Now I've been working with eight amazing organizations from the global south and the global north that have decided to join forces together to reimagine democracy through a new initiative called Demos Kratos, a global movement that has a polycentric leadership structure based on local ownership and driven by on-the-ground energy.

Today, I speak before you one year after the dramatic dismantling of the U.S. international aid structure, yet democracy champions around the world have continued organizing and mobilizing. Demos Kratos is one such example. I want to share with you today what is happening from the perspective of those on the ground.

As was mentioned by a previous speaker, civic space—or the so-called public square—is shrinking faster than ever. Authoritarian regimes' favourite tool is restrictive law. Since 2007, some of us have been indicating that there's a spike in laws choking civil society and any independent voices. According to Civicus, today only 3.4% of the world's population lives in an open society. In Hungary, for example, a new law labels NGOs, media outlets and even banks as foreign agents if they receive foreign funding or foreign revenue, or even if they simply facilitate foreign transactions. Just a few weeks ago, in Georgia, amendments to the so-called Russian NGO law were introduced, proposing a prior government approval requirement even for in-kind contributions or for supports like knowledge sharing and training. In Uganda, days before the January 15 election, 10 organizations had their permits suspended on vague security allegations. I appreciate your subcommittee's continued support for human rights defenders in the face of what's happening in Uganda.

The message from these governments to citizens is extremely clear: If you disagree with us, you don't belong. That's the message to the citizens. These developments are forcing defenders into exile. For example, Cristosal, the prominent Salvadoran organization once supported by Global Affairs Canada, announced that it would continue its human rights work from outside the country. Georgian activists who once provided a safe haven for others now find themselves fleeing.

Despite all of this, something powerful is emerging from the global south. Civil society actors are not waiting for rescue. They are reimagining what effective democracy activism means, and it doesn't look like the traditional NGO model, I have to say.

Last June, Demos Kratos gathered 50 democracy champions from 30 different countries to ask this question: How do citizens assert power over autocrats in this particular moment? Despite vastly different contexts, they reached the same conclusion, that this moment demands deepening networks and engaging different sectors of society. Protection mechanisms for human rights defenders in Africa are collaborating more closely than ever, building capacity for financial resilience. Universities are stepping up as safe havens, despite pressure from authoritarian regimes. In Kenya, it's interesting: Young people organized a TikTok court on social media, inviting young legal professionals and witnesses to seek justice for the victims of police brutality during the June protests.

• (1555)

The Chair: If you could wrap it up, please, your time is up.

Ryota Jonen: Sure.

In Nepal, artists partnered with civil society organizations to launch the nepo babies campaign using creative means. All of this is happening.

What can Canada do? I'd like to recommend three things.

First, protect the vibrant public square. As I mentioned, foreign agents are going everywhere at the moment. Engage in the process with the UN Human Rights Committee by reimagining the international human rights framework.

Second, connect the Canadian public square with counterparts in the global south. As I mentioned, there are so many middle power democracies we need to engage.

Finally, invest in convening power. Support platforms that bring formal organizations, faith-based communities, social movements and artist collectives together into one big tent.

The democratic community is fragmented.

• (1600)

The Chair: Thank you.

You are one minute over. I'm sorry, but I can't go any longer.

Ryota Jonen: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

I now invite Mr. Taaj Daliran to take the floor for five minutes.

Taajbakhsh Daliran (Founder, Iranian Canadian Cultural Society of Vancouver Island): Good afternoon, Mr. Chair and honourable members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. Dr. Pakdel and I will be sharing the allotted time between the two of us.

We stand before you as victims and witnesses to the suffering and courage of millions of Iranians. We come carrying their voices and their urgent call to act in what has become the darkest chapter in recent human history before our eyes.

Dr. Pakdel will provide examples of systematic repression by the regime.

Kian Pakdel (Founder, Iranian Canadian Cultural Society of Vancouver Island): Thank you.

Under the Islamic regime in Iran, human rights violations [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] into the fabric of the regime's ideology.

The regime views itself as a transnational Islamic project and has [*Technical difficulty—Editor*].

From 1979-81, around 10,000 opposition members were executed. Violence was the regime's method of consolidation.

In 1988, prisoners serving long sentences were secretly executed by the death committee. Up to 5,000 prisoners were killed. Even remaining faithful to one's beliefs was treated as a crime.

From 1999-2003, students seeking press and political freedoms were attacked in their dormitories, beaten, arrested and killed. Even universities were treated as battlefields.

In 2009, during the green movement protests, the regime tried to break the protesters physically and psychologically through killing, sham trials and sexual violence. Electoral integrity was systematically denied.

[*Technical difficulty—Editor*] shut down, and demonstrators protesting the sudden spike in fuel prices were gunned down in multiple [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] 1,500. Even peaceful assembly was criminalized.

In 2020, the IRGC shot down [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] people, including dozens of Canadians. People gathered to mourn were met with repression. Even grief was treated as a threat.

From 2021-22, after access to water had been routinely cut off, protests were met with live ammunition and mass arrests. Even thirst was criminalized.

From 2022-23, after Mahsa Amini was killed, a woman-led uprising swept the country. The response was an Internet blackout and the use of lethal force, killing around 500 people. Gender-based violence was legitimized.

Finally, from January 2026 to the present, economic pressure made life unbearable and millions began to protest. The regime used systematic violence, killing more than 30,000 people. The world has just witnessed a grave crime against humanity.

Now I give the floor back to Mr. Daliran.

Taajbakhsh Daliran: When a state wages violence against its own population, responsibility is no longer optional; it is a necessity. Regimes like this cannot be restrained by unarmed civilians alone. In such conditions, protecting them won't be resolved by diplomacy and sanctions. It needs collective intervention.

We therefore urge the Canadian government to, first, explicitly recognize that the crimes of the Islamic regime constitute mass atrocity crimes under the R2P framework.

Second, publicly reaffirm Canada's position that the state's sovereignty cannot be invoked to shield mass atrocity crimes, and that the international community must act when a state massacres its own people.

Third, press the UN Security Council to enact all measures available under R2P's third pillar, including collective military intervention, given that peaceful and diplomatic efforts have proven to be insufficient to protect Iranians.

In closing, history will judge all of us not by our words but by whether we acted when confronted with injustice. The Iranian people have shown the world what bravery looks like. Now they are asking the world to stand with them.

Thank you.

• (1605)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Daliran. That's touching.

Now I would like to invite Dr. Tamara Cofman Wittes to take the floor for five minutes.

Tamara Cofman Wittes (President, National Democratic Institute): Thank you, Mr. Chair and members of the committee. It's a great honour to appear before you today.

The National Democratic Institute is non-profit and non-partisan. We believe that a world rooted in freedom and dignity fosters more stability, security and prosperity for everyone. We are based in America's democratic civil society, but over our 43 years of work, we have built a global presence, a global workforce and a global perspective on democracy.

We work to advance freedom, citizen participation and accountable governance when and where it matters most. In Ukraine, we help political parties come together, even amidst civil war, to advance EU accession. In Iran, we help citizens expose the diversion of public funds to the security services. Across eastern Europe and the Caucasus, we help democratic societies push back against a firehose of Russian malign influence. Across the African continent, we work with youth activists and women leaders to protect peaceful elections, end civil conflict and open up sovereign debt for public scrutiny.

We also work with long-lasting regional and global networks, like the Global Network for Domestic Election Monitors, whose chair in Uganda is now under court charges from the Museveni regime. I have provided the committee with our latest report on the threats facing these defenders of the right to vote.

Canada has been an essential partner in this work. Canadians from government, Parliament and civil society regularly participate, leading election observer delegations, joining our staff and strengthening our programs to support democratic actors all around the world. I see opportunities to build on our enduring partnership, from Haiti to West Africa, Ukraine and the Middle East.

On a personal note, I am profoundly grateful to the Government of Canada. After the fall of Kabul to the Taliban, your government accepted 178 of NDI's former Afghan staff and their families into your country as refugees. Thank you for that extraordinary act of leadership.

There is no question that this is a challenging time for democracy around the world. Inequality, declining trust and intense polarization drive divisions that are made worse by the substitution of social media for social capital. We, as democracies, don't face only internal challenges; we also face an onslaught of efforts by autocratic actors, like Russia, Iran and China, to deliberately undermine our confidence in our own democratic systems. They do this to weaken accountability and transparency in order to make it easier to expand their own corrupt influence. We see this malign influence in almost every country where we work. Working closely with our local partners, we are building ways to counteract those malign efforts with citizen participation, civil society protection and strategic pro-democracy communication.

Many local citizens, political parties and parliaments rely on global partners, like NDI, that provide election observation, international solidarity and expert technical support. Until last year, the majority of this work was funded by the U.S. government. Our partners are struggling, but they will not stop working. The need for democratic solidarity and concrete support is urgent.

Let me underscore the value of Canada's investments in democracy and governance.

Strengthening the rule of law and government transparency builds better environments abroad for Canadian businesses to trade and invest in. It builds more secure supply chains for strategic minerals. Supporting dialogue and coalition building, especially when they include women fully, helps societies overcome conflict and anchors more lasting peace agreements. Empowering citizens to hold their governments accountable helps protect human rights, advance human development and reduce the space available for corruption, terrorism and the trafficking of drugs and people.

• (1610)

These are some of the ways in which supporting democracy abroad helps advance security, stability and prosperity at home. The challenges facing democracies can feel daunting at this moment, but the unique advantage of democratic societies is that we contain within ourselves the means to correct our own deficiencies. As democratic societies, solidarity is more important to us than ever. A world in which human dignity and democracy prevail can be ours, as long as all of us stand together in the fight, rooted in our values and confident in our cause. We are grateful for Canada's solidarity with people seeking freedom around the world.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Cofman Wittes.

Now, I would like to invite Mr. Ivo Balinov to take the floor, for five minutes, please.

Ivo Balinov (Executive Director, Programs, Parliamentary Centre): Mr. Chair and members, Marci and I represent the Parliamentary Centre, a Canadian non-partisan, not-for-profit organization that has focused on strengthening parliamentary democracy in over 70 countries, working with parliaments as well as with civil society groups and other democratic actors.

It has been mentioned that global democracy is in decline, with fewer democracies than autocracies. Despite this, the historical data

shows clearly that democratic backsliding, in more than half of the cases, can be revised, especially if addressed early. Success depends on what and how we invest in supporting those who lead these efforts—the democracy defenders, as you define them in this subcommittee's mandate.

I'd like to mention that democracy defenders include not just civil society but also institutions; private sector actors; judges; prosecutors; you, the parliamentarians; and the institutions of Parliament. Effective support must focus on strengthening the entire democratic ecosystem, rather than targeting just one group.

I want to give a few examples, very quick ones, from our work as an organization working on parliamentary democracy, and I'll explain what that means.

In Ukraine, we witness that democracies can endure, even under the direst conditions of war, when the institutions are supported. With the Canadian government's support, we ran the only project that supported the Ukrainian Rada to legislate on issues of security, defence and resilience during wartime. It had a lot of impact.

We have supported international parliamentary networks, such as the Women Legislators in Defence, Security and Peace, of which some of you are members. It brings together colleagues from over 25 countries to share practical experiences that help elected women contribute equally to defence security, security policy and legislation.

I will give a shout-out to ParlAmericas, which I think some of you know. Again, it's a Canadian-based, democratic institution developing impactful democracy, strengthening programming across the western hemisphere. It will celebrate 25 years next month. We were proud to be part of its origins by supporting its secretariat in the beginning.

While threats to democracy continue to rise, they are coupled with a funding environment that is under increasing pressure on a global scale. As others pull out, Canadian organizations are looked to for support more than ever. There is a need and a leadership opportunity for Canada. We recognize that Canada, like many of our democratic allies, faces fiscal constraints. However, stronger support for safeguarding democracy can be achieved even by the rebalancing of existing and diminishing resources.

To give you an example, in 2023-24, Canada's support for democratic development represented only \$165 million out of an ODA portfolio totalling \$12.3 billion. Democratic institutions, particularly legislatures and political parties, received the least support—below three per cent.

To sum it up, the main issue is not necessarily the amount of funding. It's the need to make support for democracy the strategic government priority. Doing so would help Canada advance its key interests in sovereignty, defence, trade and investment. Democratic rules, institutions, values and processes remain essential for these efforts. Strong parliamentary democracies foster economic prosperity. They support stability and peace, and they strengthen effective international co-operation.

The dynamics of today's international environment require extra agility and flexibility in the efforts to support democracy promoters. Canadian organizations with the right expertise and proven track record exist. They're sought-after and welcomed, but they mostly operate on a project-to-project funding model and have for a long time. That limits the ability to remain flexible and agile, especially now, when democracies and democracy promoters are under threat.

EU member states, EU institutions and the U.K. government have all strengthened their democracy support efforts through stable, long-term partnerships with their respective organizations. They've demonstrated that predictable funding is efficient and cost-effective.

Canadian organizations working in our field would be better positioned to advance Canada's strategic priorities if there were a clear focal point to coordinate our work and provide predictable, sustained financial support. Again, we're not asking for more. We're asking for things to be done differently.

With the right approach, Canadian organizations can work together proactively, rather than reactively, under a team Canada banner, to contribute in a coordinated way to the strategic objective of Canada and its democratic allies, as we all navigate a rapidly changing geopolitical trade and security environment.

● (1615)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Balinov.

Now I would like to invite Madam Marci Surkes to take the floor for five minutes.

Marci Surkes (Vice-Chair of the Board, Parliamentary Centre): Mr. Balinov spoke for both of us.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

I would like to move to our round of questions and answers.

I would like to invite Madam Kronis to take the floor for seven minutes, please.

Tamara Kronis (Nanaimo—Ladysmith, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to all the witnesses for sharing your perspectives on the current situation for democracy and human rights defenders around the world.

In particular, thanks to Mr. Daliran and Dr. Pakdel for sharing your deeply personal experiences with us. We share your pain here and hope that sharing brings you strength.

Mr. Daliran, I'm going to start with you. What happens to human rights defenders in Iran?

Taajbakhsh Daliran: Through the chair, I apologize in advance. I may get emotional. I have been exposed and victimized first-hand.

Shortly after the revolution, or its inception, as a young teenager, I was watching early one morning when there was a knock on the door. I was going to open the door, and then all of a sudden a group of military uniformed men came into my home. They went to the second floor, taking my father out of his bed in just his underwear, and for two months following that we didn't even know where he was. Four years later, he was released.

This is a brief story on what he has told us. The military men hung them for days from behind, without any food, and they cut their bodies in different places. When they refused to give in, the men nailed their feet and left them to bleed for hours. That's an example of my first-hand experience.

I can give you the story of my wife. As a young girl, her father was taken from them, just because he was part of the opposition party. He was taken to a prison, with the family not knowing where he was, and finally the family was allowed to go and visit him for the last time. When they got the body, they saw seven shotgun wounds in his body. The family were not allowed to mourn or to have any events; they just....

I'm sorry. I'm going to pass over those moments.

I'm going to go to today. Just watching the videos, which I'm sure are published on many platforms, shows the brutality of this regime and how they're going to kill without hesitation anybody who has a voice against their beliefs.

If you will allow me, I want to ask Dr. Pakdel if he has any notes to add to my comments.

Tamara Kronis: That would be great.

The Chair: Go ahead, Dr. Pakdel.

Kian Pakdel: Sure. I would add only that this regime unfortunately rules through fear and through the psychological manipulation of human rights defenders to silence them.

They also rely on a propaganda system to show the world the reality in a different way. One example of the lies they use is that a lot of the violence created during the protests in Iran has been shown to be caused by the regime itself. They send people among peaceful protesters and ask them to escalate and set trees, buildings and government places on fire, and then they start shooting.

That's the only thing that I have to add.

• (1620)

Tamara Kronis: Thank you for that testimony.

Ms. Trilsch talked about attempts to silence human rights defenders.

You're here today representing a very small community: the Iranian Canadian Cultural Society of Vancouver Island. We live on the edge of Canada, in a place that's very far from Iran. As representatives of that community, can you tell us whether anyone has tried to silence members of our community?

Taajbakhsh Daliran: Through the chair, yes, there have been attempts. It hasn't been violent. It has been different, and mostly psychological, through the use of platforms and disrespectful notes and comments.

It has been obvious that recently there have been a few disappearances—one in Toronto, very recently. I don't think I should name them. We have had similar situations where the regime has taken actions even inside Canada.

Tamara Kronis: In just two days, the Iranian regime will be 47 years old, despite sanctions, protests and military action.

Do you have any insight for us into why this regime persists and survives?

Taajbakhsh Daliran: This is a regime based on extreme beliefs. They have, many times, portrayed themselves as holy and divinely sent by God and said that they are going to cleanse the entire world. That's what they believe. Then they allow themselves to do whatever it takes. They violate any human right, at any level, in order to dictate what they believe in.

We are talking about a group that has the power. They have machine guns deployed on the streets, and the people behind those machine guns either share that extreme idea or have to carry out the orders, because, if they don't, it would be disobeying. The regime usually declares a state of emergency. They will be executed if they don't carry out those orders.

On the other side, what we have is a people. The only weapons they have are their pens to write with, their voices to speak with and their fists to raise.

Tamara Kronis: I have a few seconds left.

Mr. Jonen talked about Canada's convening power. How can Canada use its convening power to help in Iran?

Taajbakhsh Daliran: I'm sorry. I'm emotional.

Dr. Pakdel, would you elaborate on this?

Kian Pakdel: Yes.

One way Canada can help is by hearing the opposition, so I want to thank the members of this subcommittee for the opportunity.

Another way is by recognizing the fact that this is not a regime to negotiate with. That's key, I believe. This is not a regime that will change through reform or negotiation. This is a regime that has massacred its own people from its inception.

It's time for the world, including Canada, to take concrete actions to protect the people of Iran. That's not just through soft, diplomatic efforts but also by listening to the people of Iran, who are trying to make a regime change there in order to achieve the freedom and democracy they deserve.

• (1625)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Kronis.

I would like to invite Madam Vandenberg to take the floor for seven minutes.

Anita Vandenberg (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to acknowledge Mr. Daliran and Dr. Pakdel. Your words are voicing things for the voiceless. You're illustrating exactly why this committee needs to look at how we support human rights defenders and democracy advocates everywhere in the world, including in Iran.

I would like to direct my first question to Dr. Wittes.

You are the president of probably the largest democracy promotion organization in the world. You are based in Washington. I know that, over the years, NDI has worked in over 130 countries, which brings it an incredible amount of knowledge and perspective, and quite the vantage point right now as to what is happening in the world.

We're at a moment when authoritarianism and authoritarian regimes are putting a tremendous amount of effort into learning from one another and undermining democracies around the world. At the same time, we're seeing less funding and support for those who are fighting for democracy.

What, from your perspective, is the current situation? How urgent is it? What is it that the international community should be doing?

Tamara Cofman Wittes: Those are big questions, and I'll do my best to address them briefly, Mr. Chair.

Perhaps a year ago, NDI was the largest global democracy support organization. A year ago, we had a global staff of 1,200 people working in 58 countries, and 40% of them were not U.S. citizens. Today, I have 250 people and we are working in about 30 countries. That's the impact on us of the cuts to U.S. government funding.

I think what's important, though, is not as much the impact on us but the impact on those local partners with whom we were compelled to break faith when U.S. funding cuts came into place.

As I said in my testimony, they are not stopping their work, but we have many fewer ways in which to help them. One of the most important ways is the regional and global networks that we and our colleagues at IRI and other organizations helped to establish. I couldn't agree more with Ivo that it's not just civil society; it is members of Parliament and parliamentary assemblies. It is political parties and party internationals. If we want to rebuild public trust in democracy that delivers for citizens, we have to look at the whole ecosystem. That, I think, is one important thing.

One of the biggest gaps left behind with the absence of U.S. funding is support for credible elections and for citizen monitoring of their own countries' electoral processes. That's why I mentioned the Global Network of Domestic Election Monitors. That is one area I would point to.

Another important area is learning faster from one another. Many countries around the world have been able to successfully identify and combat malign information campaigns from autocratic powers. There are countries across parliaments and across Africa that we have worked with to expose the abusive terms of China's sovereign debt agreements, but they need to share those lessons with one another. If we're not able to be that hub for them, others need to step up and do that.

Anita Vandenberg: That leads quite perfectly into my next question, which is for Mr. Jonen.

I know you're also based in Washington, and you were, until earlier this year, the director of the World Movement for Democracy, based at the National Endowment for Democracy.

In full disclosure, I was on the steering committee of the World Movement for Democracy, led by Maria Ressa, the Nobel laureate from the Philippines. That was a network that really brought together human rights defenders, democracy...hundreds of people around the world. The dismantling of that network, along with a lot of the funding that we talked about, has really isolated many of these democracy movements.

In that gap, you have now started a new—not even an organization, but a movement. Can you tell us, first of all, the impact of having a number of these human rights defenders losing those linkages to the international supports? What are they doing in place of those, and what do they need from us?

• (1630)

Ryota Jonen: Let me say two things about the immediate impact of dismantling the American aid system.

One is that, yes, NED is surviving at the moment, but surviving is not thriving. One of the things that's happening is that limited funding is going to very restrictive environments, the darkest places in the world—Russia, China, Iran, Cuba and so on. That's important. We need to keep that fight in those spaces.

As you know, in the last several years, democratic challenges are around middle-power countries where democratic ideas are contested, and support for those spaces is shrinking, so that's one immediate concern we have. Just imagine a world without independent journalism in the Philippines. There would be no human rights defenders in the Philippines. Who would be fighting for the security

of the South China Sea? Because Canada and so many countries are supporting independent media, we are able to fight in that space.

Imagine South Africa if there were no independent journalists or robust civil society. Who would point out that Russian money was coming to a particular political party? Who would be exposing that? If there were no support, nobody would expose it.

It is important to think in those terms.

World Movement for Democracy was dismantled, but their existing global networks, as Tamara was saying, are the pockets of stars and pockets of democracy. These pockets need to be connected, and I thought that's what World Movement for Democracy and the Global Network of Domestic Election Monitors are supposed to provide. At the moment, we need that support, and this is what I meant by saying Canada should be investing in convening power.

The Chair: Thank you, Anita. Your time is up.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe now has the floor for seven minutes.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses for being here for this important study.

Ms. Trilsch, you've certainly got a great deal of experience, given your position. How would you describe the current situation for human rights and democracy defenders? Can you speak to global developments over the past five years?

Mirja Trilsch: As I said earlier, attacks on human rights defenders are nothing new. There may be a shift in dynamics, which I have seen in the work we do at the International Human Rights Clinic. Increasingly, we have had to work on defending our partners rather than their projects as such.

The issue of funding was already raised by other witnesses. Yes, we saw partners who were unable to pursue certain projects because funding, particularly from the U.S. Agency for International Development, or USAID, was cut off. Many of our fellow researchers in universities, not just in the United States but around the world, have come under increased pressure and have lost funding. They are also human rights defenders. Human rights advocacy is not limited to civil society organizations.

It is also important to note that defending human rights is not a profession per se. Human rights defenders can be civil society organizations, academics, journalists, nurses, social workers. The term “human rights defenders” is very, very broad. Pressure has expanded and is now being exerted on all those who voice criticism. It is no longer limited to civil society. Criticism, more broadly, is coming under pressure.

• (1635)

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: You say that the definition of a human rights defender is very broad, but have you seen a change in the profile of those currently targeted by authoritarian regimes? Are they the same people as before, or not? Is the profile different? Has it remained the same as what we've always seen over time?

Mirja Trilsch: I think it depends on the regime. There are regimes that continue to primarily target civil society, while others target university researchers to a greater extent, and regimes that target journalists to a greater extent. It's always those who are perceived as dangerous to the regime. Where do ideas that are perceived as dangerous come from? I think that's the question we need to ask ourselves. Depending on the answer, the targets will vary in certain contexts.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: There is one question that may not have been answered earlier. Do you feel that there is increased cooperation between different authoritarian regimes beyond their borders, to share information in order to target individuals or organizations? Do you think they are working together?

Mirja Trilsch: There is a lot of sharing of authoritarian strategies. We often see that what works in certain contexts is then imitated by other authoritarian regimes because they have seen that it works. I am a law professor, after all. In my role, it is more difficult to assess how governments work together behind the scenes, away from public view. Over the past few years, I have observed a great deal of copying and pasting within strategies for targeting defenders.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you.

Ms. Cofman Wittes, you spoke earlier about supply chains, an increasingly important issue, especially for countries like Canada. Yet in recent months, countries like Canada and the United Kingdom have signed agreements with the Chinese regime.

A diplomatic thaw is understandable. However, the signed agreements do involve products known to be derived from forced labour. This inevitably means that Canadian consumers will unintentionally participate in the production of goods using forced labour.

Doesn't it seem inconsistent with public discourse on human rights when economic agreements are signed with a power such as China, which we know full well uses forced labour in its supply chains?

[*English*]

Tamara Cofman Wittes: When we think about strategic relationships with countries around the world—and I served twice in the U.S. State Department, so I have been a diplomat responsible for those kinds of relationships—there are always lots of different interests that you have to balance. If you want secure supplies of strategic minerals, for example, you don't want that supply guaran-

teed for one year, two years or five years. You want it guaranteed for 50 years. This is the foundation of the future economy.

How do you get that security? You don't get it from partnering with an unaccountable leader who does not operate with the support of their people. You don't get it by collaborating with a leader who engages in wide-scale corruption, because those who are feeding from his hand today may turn against him tomorrow.

If you want long-term, strategic relationships, you want them rooted in shared values, in transparency and in a government that, as your partner, has the support of its citizens—a democratic government.

When we think about things like strategic minerals, I think we want to make sure that those mining concessions are being done in a transparent way, so that the money governments get goes to benefit citizens. That's what's going to bring us real security.

• (1640)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

[*English*]

I would like to invite Mr. Zuberi to take the floor for five minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Sameer Zuberi (Pierrefonds—Dollard, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses who joined us today.

[*English*]

I'd like to start off with Ms. Wittes.

You made a really important remark in your opening that was essentially around coalition building and how it's important to include women. Many might not actually understand why that is. Would you just elaborate a bit, for the benefit of all watching? Why is that the case?

Tamara Cofman Wittes: That's a very important question.

Those of us who work in international development, human development, democracy, and peace and security have done extensive work, as academics and policy-makers, documenting the impact of full inclusion of women in the economy, in politics and in society.

We know, for example, that peace agreements that are forged when women have a seat at the table last longer and survive challenges better than peace agreements that are negotiated exclusively by men. We know that if you're doing microlending, if you lend to women heads of households, you will get better human development outcomes than if you are lending only to male heads of households. We know that for every year of education a girl gets, there will be positive benefits for her family into the next generation.

We also know a lot more now about what it takes to really enable the full inclusion of women in politics. NDI, for example, did a controlled trial in southern Africa of different approaches to encouraging women's participation in politics. It was supporting women alone or supporting women and also working with their male counterparts in political parties. We found that we were more impactful in getting women involved in politics, running for office and getting elected when we worked with the men as well.

Our men, politics and power program is a scientifically backed intervention. That's just one example of the kinds of outcomes we can get.

Sameer Zuberi: We have about two and a half minutes left. In that time, I just want to open up the floor to those who have some pithy remarks around how middle powers, including Canada, navigate this moment, with America's perturbations and all the challenges in the United States.

We see Minneapolis. We see what's happening on the international stage with Greenland. How do we engage other middle powers in order to promote the respect of people at the end of the day, through democracies and the rules-based order? I just want to open that up.

Ivo Balinov: Thank you very much. It's a very pertinent question.

I have a couple of points on this.

The first one is that, for a long time, our work was done within the realm of official development assistance. I don't know if this framework is relevant to the realities of the day anymore. Democracies are a minority. We have to reach out and support one another.

My second point is on areas to work together in. Of course, there are many, but I will mention the importance of youth—youth anywhere around the world, but also youth in democracies. There's a well-documented trend, including here in Canada: Young people are disillusioned with traditional institutions and decision-making processes. This is a big danger for the future of democracy, really.

I'm very pleased to say that with the support of our European partners, we started a project last week. It's a Canada-EU forum on the future of democracy in order to understand what young people think and to have an honest conversation with them on what it takes to re-engage them in reimagining and participating in democracy.

I think youth are a very important investment in the future these days, across democracies.

Sameer Zuberi: I also want to ask you something, Mr. Daliran.

You suggested that the Security Council could intervene with respect to Iran. Given that Russia is on the Security Council, which might be a challenge, how do you see international organizations helping to support the people of Iran?

• (1645)

The Chair: Give us a quick answer.

Taajbakhsh Daliran: Starting that process brings back hope to people in Iran and across the globe.

I have first-hand recollections, communications and very up-to-date information. Iranians inside Iran and outside in the world have all come to the point where there isn't any solution other than military intervention. As I said, the only things they have are their voices, their pens and their fists. There is nothing else left. If we allow this opportunity to pass, when this Islamic regime is at its weakest point....

On the other side, the United States and Canada—despite some disagreements on the economy—share the fundamental value of human rights. If we come together and start the process, even if it's blocked by the Russians, we'll still show the world that we are standing up for human rights. We are not closing our eyes. We are not ignoring it. We are not selecting public, international outreach only in the specific settings we are interested in. This is a complete violation of the rights that every human being is born with.

Sameer Zuberi: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now I'd like to invite Mr. Majumdar to take the floor for five minutes.

Shuvaloy Majumdar (Calgary Heritage, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Dr. Wittes, thank you. Many people have had a chance to provide various perspectives, but we're really grateful for your testimony on human rights and democracy. It's obviously an interesting time to be discussing this.

I'm a student and product of institutes, and I'm grateful for the work I was able to undertake with colleagues across the world, in Asia and the Middle East. I've had moments to think a bit about the origin of the institute. Originally, it was to confront the Soviet communists, and successfully so. In the work the institutes have done—not just the two party-based ones but also the Center for International Private Enterprise and the International Solidarity Movement. The transition from a post-Soviet world to a democratic world wasn't just a success. It was a raging success for a period of time, until the hangover came home to roost.

In the last 20 years or so, we've seen democracy and human rights emerge as an industry. With it come the ideologies of transnational progressivism and neo-conservative adventurism—which I was a part of and which I have learned from. We have a world today in which the communist party that is the most threatening is the Chinese Communist Party, which is informed by technological and data advantages. They've woven the state capitalist model into a market that was originally built for market-based models.

Dr. Wittes, I don't mean to put you on the spot, but I'm curious. This is an opportunity to learn from the last decades and to say, "Okay, in the rubble of what we're dealing with now, all our international institutions are apocalyptically afire."

What does it mean to reorient the work around the actual promotion of democracy, the nation-state, individual rights and the classical liberal ideas that underpinned the consensus before the new consensus emerged?

Tamara Cofman Wittes: I am not sure that the work of my institute or the other three institutes that were created under the umbrella of the National Endowment for Democracy.... I don't think we've changed our models, our principles or our projects. Every society in which democracy emerges is going to build a democracy that represents its own views and values. It will come to its own compromises on issues of social contention. That's true in every functioning democracy. We work across parties. We don't dictate agendas. We do polling and focus groups, and we say to political parties, "Hey, here's what your people say they want from you." That's what we're there to do.

I can't speak to the work of other organizations with other agendas, but that's how the NED family works. That's the first point.

The second point is that, yes, the Chinese Communist Party presents a grave threat to human freedom in China and around the world. We see the impact in this hemisphere. We see it, as I said, in almost every country where we work. These autocratic adversaries may not all be motivated by ideology as they go around the world, undermining democracy; they may be doing it simply because undermining democratic accountability and undermining governments that are accountable to their people gives them more room. It's that self-interest, I think.

While the geopolitical context may no longer be a grand battle of ideologies, the consequences of these autocratic states behaving in the way they behave are the same for individuals, human development and human freedom. I would say that no matter what geopolitical competition may be going on, citizens in any given country want to vote. As Madeleine Albright, my mentor, always used to say, they want to vote and they want to eat. They want a democracy that delivers for them.

Yes, we need to worry about these autocratic assaults. We also need to make sure that democratic institutions are delivering what citizens want from them.

• (1650)

Shivaloy Majumdar: I appreciate your response.

I have about 30 seconds left. I'll turn the question now to Mr. Yonke.

Could you provide a couple of case studies, even just in name now, that would allow us to bring new models of democratic development to the empowerment of the people?

Chris Yonke: I'll be brief. Looking ahead to where we are going to have to build in Ukraine, eventually, the kinetic activity in Ukraine will cease. There will be elections. There will need to be supports for political parties, Parliament, the rule of law and civil society. It's one thing to be there and support them during the kinetic

activities, as Canada, NATO partners and the EU have done, but we need to be there for the entire rebuilding.

I will also say this. I think we've all heard some very impactful testimony today, and I think we need to consider whether Canada can be ready for a rapid deployment when the most horrific regimes fall. Horrific regimes will fall, and we need to be ready to act. It's not something whereby we can simply wait for the next budget cycle or budget update in order to be able to act. We would have to be able to do something quickly and move ahead.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Majumdar.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe now has the floor for five minutes.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to pick up on that, but in a different way.

Mr. Jonen and Mr. Yonke, are you presently observing or sensing a disengagement by democracies from the human rights situation in authoritarian regimes around the world?

[*English*]

Chris Yonke: Our democracy is disengaging when it comes to authoritarian regimes. Fighting authoritarian regimes requires support. It is mentally, physically and financially draining. It takes all the resources that an organization will have to do it, and it is consistently going against a very hard and direct wall. The rules are constantly changing around you. Is it a depleting fight? It can be, and then you finally get some slow gains going forward.

Look at the belt and road initiative. There was a debt cycle for countries. It was very oppressive, but offering training about how to go in with your eyes wide open, what to look for in agreements and how countries can do developments on their own.... It was one small thing to do. Go from there, looking at how authoritarian regimes can influence media and influence information in the direct space. Finding small wins coming through can make a difference from there.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Mr. Jonen, I'll let you answer.

[*English*]

Ryota Jonen: If I can add something, yes, democracy is disengaging from human rights. They are very selective ones.

In places like Belarus, we see political prisoners being released because of democracies engaging in a selective way. We see that today, in Venezuela, political prisoners are being released, even though some of them are going back to prison. However, in places where minerals are being contested and competed for, the human rights agenda is not mentioned in a diplomatic conversation, so it's very selective.

• (1655)

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Ms. Coffman Wittes, you spoke earlier about the U.S. Agency for International Development.

Currently, there is worldwide debate about funding for international development. This naturally affects NGOs and human rights organizations, because that is also part of their mandate. International development is a sizable envelope, after all.

We see that Japan has eliminated almost all of its funding. Some European countries have made deep cuts to their budgets.

Canada, for its part, just announced that it will be cutting \$2.5 billion over the next three years. In terms of international development funding, Canada will therefore find itself below what it was under the Harper government. On top of that, a new vision of international development directly links trade to international development. That is the Canadian government's new vision.

Isn't this approach cause for concern? Shouldn't we be putting more money into international development instead, to help people understand that it will have an impact even here, in their own country, their own community, their own municipality?

[English]

Tamara Cofman Wittes: Thank you.

As Mr. Majumdar mentioned, NDI is part of a family of organizations. We're affiliated loosely with the Democratic Party. We have counterparts affiliated with the Republican Party, with the labour movement and with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. I think that it reflects a political coalition of labour and business, along with political parties, demonstrating the value of democracy around the world for the health of our own society.

I would never suggest that the funding for this work should come only from governments. However, I do want to associate myself with Ivo's comments that the funding governments provide for democracy support is pennies for the impact as compared to global health, economic development or, yes, trade. If you're talking about bang for buck, in crude terms, democracy support is some of the most effective assistance money you can spend, and it does not cost billions of dollars.

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I see that I still have some time.

Mr. Balinov, can international exchanges with different parliamentarians really influence our counterparts from regimes that are not necessarily democratic? Do they really have an influence? Does it lead to action, in your opinion? In short, should we keep these channels of communication open?

[English]

The Chair: Give a quick answer please.

Ivo Balinov: Very quickly, it does. In fact, we have witnessed from our work—and I think it has been going on since the beginning of the 1990s internationally—that there are conversations and exchanges possible at the parliamentary level, which are not necessarily always possible at the executive level. Parliamentarians do find common ground.

I mentioned the international network of Women Legislators in Defence, Security and Peace. I witnessed a meeting of members from countries who have profound disagreements at the political level. The members of the network found common ground within minutes and shared examples with each other on how they managed to advance, in their own parliament, women's roles in security and defence. That's how powerful it can be, and it costs very little.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now I would like to invite Madam Vandenberg to take the floor for five minutes, please.

Anita Vandenberg: Thank you very much. This is such an incredible panel that it's really difficult to get all of our questions in.

I want to direct a question to you, Mr. Yonke, because one thing you said at the end of your last answer was about rapid response and the urgency of this. I know that a few weeks ago, here in Ottawa, a group of Canadian practitioners, experts and organizations came together with that same sense of urgency.

We have a lot of expertise. There are a lot of Canadians who've been working with NDI, Parliamentary Centre and others. From what I understood, there's a real sense that there is a need right now in the world for Canada.

You threw out the figure that 72% of the world is living right now under autocratic regimes. I understand that in 2004, it was only 49%. As we're looking for strategic security partners, middle powers and economic partners, the more that countries are falling into authoritarianism, the fewer we have of those kinds of partners.

Isn't it true that, in effect, democracy work is a prerequisite for our national security and our economic interests?

• (1700)

Chris Yonke: Yes, it is. We've talked about economic security in that you need to be able to trust a supply chain. You need to be able to make sure you can defend a contract. You need to fight kleptocracy and corruption and make sure we can get that kind of work done in a fair and stable manner.

The problem is that authoritarianism is easy. Democracy is incredibly difficult. It's constantly giving your democratic institution a tune-up and supporting it there.

I'm worried about the rise of authoritarianism. There was a rise of nationalism that was spreading nationally years ago. I'm worried about a rise of authoritarianism, how it's going to affect some of our traditional trading partners and how that could look going forward.

There are institutions that are looking for Canada to be present. Yes, as you said, at that meeting, it was agreed at the time that there's opportunity to do more. There's no shortage of opportunities of where we can go, sadly.

Anita Vandenberg: Mr. Balinov and Ms. Surkes, I know that the Parliamentary Centre has been working in this field for many years as a Canadian organization.

You've talked a bit about the ODA model, the project-to-project model. In the world right now, where things are happening so fast with the need to pivot and work in very risky areas, what do you see as a potential future model for Canadian support for democratic development organizations like yours?

Marci Surkes: The bottom line is, as you said and as we've pointed out, that we're operating project to project; it's paycheque to paycheque.

This organization, the Parliamentary Centre, was born out of this institution. This is out of the beating heart of our democracy. It's a leading organization in this country, doing this work around the world, and it can barely get the job done.

From the Parliamentary Centre's perspective, we are open to what that model looks like and prepared to be at the table to have that discussion, but there is no time to wait. The urgency is right now. That's why we believe that it's really important to be here, and we're prepared to support the committee and its recommendations.

Anita Vandenberg: Thank you.

I'm going back to Mr. Jonen.

We're talking about urgency, but in the world you're working with, those in the global south, that urgency is lives. That urgency is people. It's people disappearing and people being arrested.

What would you say that the people, organizations and movement that you're working on in the global south are looking to countries like Canada for?

Ryota Jonen: They're looking for partners, not patrons. I think, in the last 25 or 30 years, this international aid architecture was the patron. They're looking for equal partnership. They're looking for not just a government-to-government partnership but people, a citizen-to-citizen partnership. That's where I think the importance comes in.

Anita Vandenberg: Dr. Wittes, I know there's been talk about whether Canada needs to have something like NDI, NED or IRI.

What do you see as a unique space where Canada would be able to contribute at this point, when the gaps are so huge?

Tamara Cofman Wittes: My colleagues spoke about convening power, and I think that is a very important capability that Canada

offers, because people can come here easily. Other parts of the world are harder to travel to and harder to get in or out of, and I think Canada—I don't know if it's as a middle power, but as a strong, stable, democratic and multicultural society, is a welcoming place for democratic convening.

I would really foot-stomp that. I think that's a very important one.

I also think that the voice of the Canadian government and the Canadian Parliament on human rights matters is heard around the world. I remember—and I know it was not without controversy—that the Canadian government's response to the murder of my friend Jamal Khashoggi mattered. It mattered around the world.

We have, unfortunately, seen transnational repression increase in the years since that murder took place, but it matters when Canada stands up for what is right.

• (1705)

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Cofman Wittes.

Now I would like to invite Mr. Davies to take the floor for five minutes.

Fred Davies (Niagara South, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm so grateful to hear everybody's perspective today. For the most part, we've focused on things that are happening today, the urgency and the dangers around the world, but for younger people who may be watching this committee, who don't have a perspective on history, there are several things that were said today.

For example, Ms. Vandenberg gave the statistic that 72% of people in the world today are not living in a democracy. That is a concerning figure that I'm sure a lot of people in Canada are unaware of.

Who's the historian in the group who can give me some perspective on this? I'm looking for some perspective on the ebbs and flows of how democracy has changed or evolved over, say, several decades. Is there a greater correlation today, for example, between economic nationalism and the decline of democratic institutions or the strength of democracies in the world?

Mr. Yonke or Mr. Jonen might want to take a stab at that for me.

Ryota Jonen: I can say a few things.

One is to share my personal story. I grew up in Hiroshima, and from elementary school to high school, in the education system, we had a peace education course that we had to take every month, in which we talked to the hibakusha, the survivors of the atomic bomb.

From a young age, we've been told different stories of history. We need to think about how we tell a younger generation about the struggle today. I've been engaging with some American university students, and they're well aware of the challenges. Sometimes they don't know what to engage with or how to engage.

Sharing the global experiences of struggles and telling those stories in a very creative way to younger generations may be impactful.

The second thing about history is that, yes, I think economic nationalism is definitely causing problems for democratic institutions, but I will step back a bit and say that democracy works because we have a healthy, productive society. When you don't have a strong health care system in the country and if you don't have a good education system, then the productivity of society goes down. That's where the economic challenges come from and why democratic institutions have been challenged.

It's not just about the economy; it's about health issues and educational issues. Those are all democracy issues, and what we are saying here in our testimony is that, yes, trade and the economy are important issues, but we need to have a much broader perspective to make sure that democracy survives.

Fred Davies: Mr. Yonke, I wonder if you can give me some perspective on what you think the key markers are that we're facing today and give us some idea of democracies that are being challenged today and are in danger of losing the strength of democracy.

Do you see any trends or key markers you can identify as being important?

Chris Yonke: I think information integrity is constantly a challenge. We have greater access to information now than we've ever had, and we're not necessarily sure of the source or who is providing the information coming in. That's a challenge for a number of democracies around the world.

The participation, or lack of participation, is also a challenge for democracies around the world. When only a few are making the decisions, and many are staying home and letting someone else decide, that's a challenge coming through.

As well, when the rules are constantly changing—you have a leadership class that is creating a new rule or creating a new phase coming through—it's not levelling the playing field. That is a challenge coming through.

You also have a real trend with some authoritarian governments where they're a democracy "by show". There is a media. There are government institutions. There is an election commission, but it's rigged. They're controlling the rules. They're controlling the game. That is something we need to watch for around the world as well.

I hope that answers your question.

• (1710)

Fred Davies: Yes. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you. Your time is over.

[Translation]

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, you have the floor for five minutes.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much to all the witnesses, because your testimony will be very useful to us. You've been fantastic.

Ms. Trilsch, based on academic research, can you tell the committee which public policies have proven to be most effective in protecting human rights defenders who were at risk?

Mirja Trilsch: As I mentioned in my testimony, I think we need to ensure that international mechanisms and institutions are well protected and functional. This is vitally important. It is difficult to find protection mechanisms for human rights defenders who are at risk within their own countries. So, inevitably, international mechanisms such as the Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders are essential for exposing what is happening on the ground. This must be done outside the country.

I would argue that we must avoid international mechanisms also coming under attack because of a lack of funding. Some of the people who work for them are themselves under attack. There are judges from the International Criminal Court on the terrorist list in the United States. That makes no sense. A Special Rapporteur has been accused. So this sometimes jeopardizes the only mechanisms that exist to protect human rights defenders. The Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders contacts an average of 80 states per year on behalf of some 500 human rights defenders around the world. That's huge. It's a huge job that's truly important. Therefore, we must protect international mechanisms; we must strengthen them.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Let's take the example of sanctions targeting individuals—so externally—but in relation to acts they will commit. There are Canadian sanctions targeting Chinese government officials over the Uyghur genocide.

In terms of sanctions, can visa restrictions specifically targeting individuals, for example, be of any help in terms of what will happen within the borders—where these individuals are targeted—or do you think that is difficult to measure?

Mirja Trilsch: Personally, I can't cite any studies that would allow me to tell you whether it's measurable or not. Broadly speaking, I think that any action that denounces attacks on human rights in general, as well as on human rights defenders, is a step in the right direction. I think it is essential to protect ourselves against normalizing rhetoric in which human rights are constantly under attack, where it becomes normal for certain rights to be delegitimized, where it is normal for certain pressures to exist, and where intimidation and harassment become acceptable. I think we need to keep the conversation going in order to protect human rights defenders.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you.

Mr. Daliran, I'll let you have the last word. If you have a message to convey, you are in a public meeting and you have free rein to deliver it. I think I have about a minute left, so you have one minute.

• (1715)

[*English*]

Taajbakhsh Daliran: Canada may be considered to be a middle-power country in the world. I have been in many other countries, and I have very vast connections to many Iranians who were forced to leave Iran post revolution. They are well connected to the people of the nations they live in. Canada is far stronger and far more influential on the world stage. We should never underestimate that strength.

As a continuation to this conversation, any time international states, in general, have delayed and sometimes even ignored the signs of a new authoritarian dictatorship being established, it becomes a problem later. The cost of prevention is far less than going to deal with it.

As I am not a researcher, a politician or a scientist, I can talk only about my own experience in Iran. With some support, in the early stages of establishment, that regime could have had its direction either changed or stopped.

We are at this stage 47 years after suffering. Hundreds of thousands of people have been killed. Almost four million Iranians are exiled, whether that exile was wanted or unwanted. Around 90 million people in Iran, most of them educated and skilled, who can contribute to the economy of this world, feel imprisoned. It is a real prison in Iran.

The point I'm trying to make is that any delay in taking further actions would just create more problems for the environment and the world we are going to leave our children.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Daliran, and thank you, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

On behalf of the subcommittee and myself, I would like to thank all of the witnesses for being with us this afternoon. Your presence is highly and profoundly appreciated. Your answers to our questions have enlightened this subcommittee. We would like to thank you deeply. Hopefully, everything will go according to what we discussed here.

The meeting is suspended.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

Published under the authority of the Speaker of
the House of Commons

SPEAKER'S PERMISSION

The proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees are hereby made available to provide greater public access. The parliamentary privilege of the House of Commons to control the publication and broadcast of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees is nonetheless reserved. All copyrights therein are also reserved.

Reproduction of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees, in whole or in part and in any medium, is hereby permitted provided that the reproduction is accurate and is not presented as official. This permission does not extend to reproduction, distribution or use for commercial purpose of financial gain. Reproduction or use outside this permission or without authorization may be treated as copyright infringement in accordance with the Copyright Act. Authorization may be obtained on written application to the Office of the Speaker of the House of Commons.

Reproduction in accordance with this permission does not constitute publication under the authority of the House of Commons. The absolute privilege that applies to the proceedings of the House of Commons does not extend to these permitted reproductions. Where a reproduction includes briefs to a committee of the House of Commons, authorization for reproduction may be required from the authors in accordance with the Copyright Act.

Nothing in this permission abrogates or derogates from the privileges, powers, immunities and rights of the House of Commons and its committees. For greater certainty, this permission does not affect the prohibition against impeaching or questioning the proceedings of the House of Commons in courts or otherwise. The House of Commons retains the right and privilege to find users in contempt of Parliament if a reproduction or use is not in accordance with this permission.

Also available on the House of Commons website at the following address: <https://www.ourcommons.ca>

Publié en conformité de l'autorité
du Président de la Chambre des communes

PERMISSION DU PRÉSIDENT

Les délibérations de la Chambre des communes et de ses comités sont mises à la disposition du public pour mieux le renseigner. La Chambre conserve néanmoins son privilège parlementaire de contrôler la publication et la diffusion des délibérations et elle possède tous les droits d'auteur sur celles-ci.

Il est permis de reproduire les délibérations de la Chambre et de ses comités, en tout ou en partie, sur n'importe quel support, pourvu que la reproduction soit exacte et qu'elle ne soit pas présentée comme version officielle. Il n'est toutefois pas permis de reproduire, de distribuer ou d'utiliser les délibérations à des fins commerciales visant la réalisation d'un profit financier. Toute reproduction ou utilisation non permise ou non formellement autorisée peut être considérée comme une violation du droit d'auteur aux termes de la Loi sur le droit d'auteur. Une autorisation formelle peut être obtenue sur présentation d'une demande écrite au Bureau du Président de la Chambre des communes.

La reproduction conforme à la présente permission ne constitue pas une publication sous l'autorité de la Chambre. Le privilège absolu qui s'applique aux délibérations de la Chambre ne s'étend pas aux reproductions permises. Lorsqu'une reproduction comprend des mémoires présentés à un comité de la Chambre, il peut être nécessaire d'obtenir de leurs auteurs l'autorisation de les reproduire, conformément à la Loi sur le droit d'auteur.

La présente permission ne porte pas atteinte aux privilèges, pouvoirs, immunités et droits de la Chambre et de ses comités. Il est entendu que cette permission ne touche pas l'interdiction de contester ou de mettre en cause les délibérations de la Chambre devant les tribunaux ou autrement. La Chambre conserve le droit et le privilège de déclarer l'utilisateur coupable d'outrage au Parlement lorsque la reproduction ou l'utilisation n'est pas conforme à la présente permission.

Aussi disponible sur le site Web de la Chambre des communes à l'adresse suivante :
<https://www.noscommunes.ca>