

## US Representative James P. McGovern

# Promotion of human rights demands collaboration

*Currently serving his ninth term in Congress, Jim McGovern is the second ranking Democrat on the House Rules Committee, which sets the terms for debate and amendments on most legislation, and a member of the House Agriculture Committee. He serves as a Senior Democratic Whip, Co-Chair of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission and Co-Chair of the House Hunger Caucus.*

**I**n March, 2013, my family and I spent three days with US civil rights leaders in Selma, Alabama. While there, we traced the footsteps of giants. My friend and civil rights hero Congressman John Lewis, who was savagely beaten for his activism during the struggle for civil rights, was there as we walked across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma. It was important to me that my son and daughter were with me, as we listened to the stories and memories of those who lived through those difficult days of struggle in the 1960s. We were reminded about how far our nation has come and how far we still have to go. Rights and freedoms are not something any of us can take for granted, but all of us should strive to protect; respect for human rights is something we must renew and commit to every day – in our personal relationships, in business, and in politics.

I strongly believe that human rights should be an integral part of both national and international political decision-making. Making human rights an unwavering priority at home and a critical component of our foreign policy is both morally right and strategically smart. All too often, we put human rights considerations on the opposite side of the scale from security and national interest concerns. That is a mistake, and it is detrimental to our long-term security objectives and national interests. When we sacrifice human rights for the illusion of stability in the short-run, we only serve to pass on greater problems to future

generations. We have seen this repeated throughout history, as “friendly tyrants”, whom we supported for the sake of perceived stability, drew strength from our silence and/or assistance and revealed themselves to be oppressive, violent dictators. Ignoring and overlooking human rights concerns in our foreign policy ensures that we continue finding ourselves on the wrong side of history. For the results of international diplomacy to be long-lasting and sustainable, human rights must be a part of the calculus of our political decisions – whether they are made in the United States, the European Union, or elsewhere.

Globalization no longer allows us to remain blind to the atrocities that are going on in the world, or to hide from the consequences of our own actions, locally and internationally. That is why the promotion and defense of human rights and dignity demand that we work together across both political and geographical lines. An old history professor of mine once observed, “the world will not get better on its own”. He was right – nothing changes unless like-minded people come together and demand change. While I can sharply and vehemently disagree with many of my colleagues in the US Congress, I have to believe that all of us are driven by the motivation to do good for our constituents, our country, and the global community. As the Democratic Co-chair of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, which I co-lead with Republican Frank Wolf of Virginia, I see that human rights concerns indeed unite us across an otherwise very divisive aisle. In a Congress notorious for its dysfunction and rancor along partisan lines, I am pleased that the Human Rights Commission is a genuinely bipartisan entity, dedicated to promoting human rights and educating our congressional colleagues on the importance of respecting, protecting and standing up for human rights around the world.

International actors should also collaborate in the promotion and support of human rights, and, importantly, hold each other accountable for their disregard. Above and beyond borders, religious beliefs and practices, languages, and cultures, we are united in our humanity, and we need to stick together in protecting it. We may disagree on how, but there should be little argument about whether we should do it.

The Russian elite’s blatant disregard for human rights exemplifies why the international community needs to act in unison in its response to the undeniable evidence of human rights abuses in Russia. The purpose of a coordinated international effort would be not to alienate Russia. To the contrary, Russia should be

a strong member of the community of democratic countries and of the European family, but democracy cannot be achieved through crude suppression of peaceful voices of dissent, marginalization of the civil society, and bullying the rest of the world into “respecting” Russia’s sovereign right to act ruthlessly toward its own citizens.

I worked to pass the Sergei Magnitsky Rule of Law Accountability Act to send a message to Russia’s violators of human rights that their transgressions are evident, and their impunity has limits – if not in their own country, then at the borders of mine. I am a strong believer that any meaningful change should come from within, should be wanted and fought for by the very people who will enjoy its benefits or suffer its consequences. However, it is also my right not to tolerate violators of human rights, and it is my country’s right not to help them perpetrate their ruthless and self-serving agenda. Another key objective of this law was to show support to those in Russia who continue to fight for their rights despite and against the seemingly impenetrable wall of systemic corruption. We hoped that Russian authorities would use this law to do what they have claimed they wanted to do for years: get rid of the “bad seeds” in their midst.

However, shortly after the passage of the Magnitsky Act, the level of the human rights dialogue between the United States and Russia sunk to a despicable low, when Russia banned adoptions by American families. Shamelessly and unapologetically, Russia’s governing elite chose to use its most vulnerable citizens – its children – as political pawns and tools for blackmail. I refuse to believe that this callous move represents Russia as a whole – the country with an unparalleled tradition of deep intellectual thought and rich cultural and literary heritage; the country whose people are praised for the depths of their “Russian soul”; the country of such great minds as Solzhenitsyn, Sakharov, and Rostropovich. Indeed, many in the Russian public called the adoption ban the “scoundrels’ law”, and tens of thousands of Russian citizens took to the streets to protest it. There is sad irony in this legislative exchange between our countries: while the Magnitsky Act aims to restrain gross violators of human rights and corrupt officials, the adoption ban targets the most vulnerable of Russia’s own population – their orphans, many of whom are now deprived of the possibility of ever knowing a loving home.

The blackmail nature of the adoption ban became further evident and undeniable with a recent letter to the Irish government, in which Russia’s

Ambassador to Ireland explicitly threatened to impose an adoption ban for Irish citizens if Ireland were to adopt legislation similar to the Magnitsky Act. Russia's bullying was rewarded: Ireland backed away, the habitual order of things ensued, and impunity prevailed.

But can we succumb to these bully tactics? I think not. In fact, I worry that the list of Russian human rights violators that my own government produced in April 2013 might have inadvertently sent the wrong message to the Russian authorities. As we see from this recent exchange between Russia and Ireland, shying away from calling human rights abusers by name might have encouraged Russian authorities to continue using orphans as bargaining chips, as hostages of their pursuit of unabridged power over their country and their people. Evidently, yielding to bullying further empowers those who harm, rob, and deprive orphans and millions of other children and adults in Russia of a better life.

I want to see our relationship with Russia normalized, functional and productive. There are so many urgent priorities in the world that need Russia, the United States, and European Union moving forward as partners – and respect for human rights is central to this partnership. It always has been. As signatories to international human rights agreements, like the Helsinki Accords, protecting fundamental human rights should be our common goal. I simply believe, however, that a stable and harmonious relationship between allies cannot and should not be built on the shaky foundation of blackmail, corruption, and blatant disregard for human rights.

In pondering the question of why we should care about what is going on in a different country, possibly on the other side of the world, Eskinder Nega, an Ethiopian journalist and prisoner of conscience, recently wrote from his cell in Kality Prison in Addis Ababa, quoting the words of Horace: “Change only the name, and this story is also about you,” and then further added: “Whenever justice suffers, our common humanity suffers, too.” I could not agree more.