

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 13, 2020

The Honorable Mike Pompeo
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20520

Ambassador Kelly Craft
United States Representative to the United Nations
United States Mission to the United Nations
799 United Nations Plaza
New York, NY 10017

Dear Secretary Pompeo and Ambassador Craft:

As COVID-19 infections spread across the globe, we are grateful for the sacrifices people in every country are making in order to stem the spread of this virus. However, the sacrifice of the freedom of speech is not one that citizens of any nation should have to endure. It has become clear that some leaders are utilizing the virus as a guise to enforce their own illiberal agendas, suppress the free flow of information, increase digital surveillance, and quash dissent.

The most visible – and devastating – effects of this practice are seen in China, the origin of the pandemic. We now know that suppression of information and censorship of criticism gave room for the virus to propagate and spread. In a March 13 analysis, researchers found that Chinese COVID-19 cases could have been reduced by 86% if measures had been taken two weeks earlier: Reporters Without Borders subsequently created a timeline outlining the progression of the pandemic that could have been halted through free speech and accurate, censorship-free reporting¹. Globally, the most successful COVID-19 interventions have been those that include transparency, coordination at all levels of government, and an informed and engaged general public.

Now, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is using this public health emergency as a thin veil to cover a crackdown on peaceful dissent and freedom of speech. China has expelled at least 13 journalists from the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Washington Post* and banned them from working in Hong Kong and Macau.² Additionally, a number of Chinese citizens reporting Wuhan—such as Fang Bin and Chen Qiushi—have disappeared.³ Populations already suffering under CCP repression, to include Tibetans and Uyghurs, are being targeted and arrested in transparent attempts to suppress their voices.⁴

Sadly, China is not unique in its utilization of the pandemic as an excuse to institute surveillance measures or draft new laws that are not necessary, proportionate, transparent, or time-bound. Iran's coronavirus taskforce banned all print media on March 30 to stymie reporting on the

¹ <https://rsf.org/en/news/if-chinese-press-were-free-coronavirus-might-not-be-pandemic-argues-rsf>

² <https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-expels-three-wall-street-journal-reporters-11582100355>

³ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-51486106>

⁴ <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/coronavirus-arrest-03192020210110.html>

virus.⁵ Egyptian authorities expelled *Guardian* correspondent Ruth Michaelson on March 16 after she reported on a scientific study that contained allegedly “exaggerated” estimates of the country’s number of cases.⁶ Venezuelan authorities detained freelance journalist Darvinson Rojas for reporting on the COVID-19 outbreak, and Turkish police detained two executives from the *Ses* newspaper for publishing a story on local coronavirus deaths.⁷ Turkish authorities are also targeting social media, detaining 229 people for making “provocative” posts about the coronavirus.⁸ Similarly, Cambodian authorities have arrested at least 23 people since January for expressing their views on the virus,⁹ and in Niger, activists such as Kaka Touda have been charged with disturbing the public order for posting on Facebook about local cases.¹⁰ Since mid-March, the Bangladeshi government has arrested a dozen people for spreading “rumors” around coronavirus, including a doctor, opposition activists, and students, using the draconian Digital Security Act.¹¹ Thai authorities have arrested artist Danai Ussama for violating the Computer Crimes Act, basing the charge on a Facebook post in which Ussama complained that Bangkok’s Suvarnabhumi Airport did not screen him for COVID-19 upon his return from Barcelona.¹²

Therefore, we call on the Department of State to document acts of harassment, arrest, increased surveillance, or other forms of suppression or criminalization by regimes in retribution for those nation’s citizens expressing their freedoms through media, social media, peaceful assembly, or other peaceful means. These cases should be raised bilaterally at the highest levels. Similarly, we call on the United States Mission to the United Nations to raise the profile of this alarming trend multilaterally at the United Nations, to include leading requests for a dialogue or briefings at the U.N. Security Council. Both the State Department and the U.S. Mission to the U.N. should also consider appropriate diplomatic engagement with like-minded partners on this issue with the goal of building upon existing speech and digital freedoms multilaterally.

We stand with the defenders of free speech and expression in China, and in any nation across the globe where an illiberal regime is threatening these fundamental human rights.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Respectfully,

⁵ <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-journalists-protest-coronavirus-taskforce-ban-on-print-media-/30519547.html>

⁶ <https://rsf.org/en/news/egypt-withdraws-british-reporters-press-credentials-questioning-official-coronavirus-figures>

⁷ <https://cpj.org/2020/03/venezuelan-journalist-arrested-by-special-forces-f.php>; <http://bianet.org/bianet/saglik/221822-gozaltina-alindiktan-sonra-koronavirus-haberlerinin-pesini-biraktik>

⁸ <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/04/turkey-journalists-social-media-pandemic-crackdown.html>

⁹ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/10/cambodia-reporter-jailed-quoting-hun-sen-covid-19>

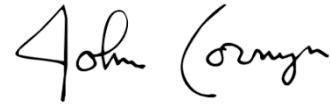
¹⁰ <https://www.franceinter.fr/emissions/l-edito-m/l-edito-m-11-mars-2020>

¹¹ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/31/bangladesh-end-wave-covid-19-rumor-arrests>

¹² <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/25/thailand-covid-19-clampdown-free-speech>



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United States Senator



John Cornyn
United States Senator



Marco Rubio
United States Senator



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