

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 15, 2025

The Honorable Marco Rubio
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Rubio,

We write with grave concerns regarding ongoing moves at the State Department to abandon U.S. leadership on human rights. Demoting the department's standalone human rights and democracy bureau, shutting down many of its offices, and severely scaling back the annual human rights reports would undermine America's standing as a champion for human rights globally. A foreign policy rooted in American values, including support for human rights, is about more than just moral leadership – it is about using our influence to create a more peaceful and prosperous world where U.S. national security interests can flourish. When we neglect human rights abroad, Americans suffer the consequences. That is why Republicans and Democrats alike have long supported a robust U.S. posture to monitor and advocate for human rights and created the very offices within the State Department that you propose to diminish.

Mr. Secretary, you yourself have said: “For over two centuries, the world has been a better place because America has strived to defend these fundamental human rights both at home and abroad. The State Department’s annual human rights report sheds light on foreign governments’ failure to respect their citizens’ fundamental rights. These violations come in all shapes and sizes, from the sexual exploitation of women and children to the denial of political rights to minorities. It is important that these nations know that the United States will stand with freedom-seeking people around the world and will not tolerate violations against their rights. Additionally, we must be mindful that American action or inaction influences tyrants’ decision to commit atrocities. During every diplomatic meeting, respect for human rights should be central to the discussion.”¹ Therefore, it is all the more confounding why you would oversee such a wholesale retreat from U.S. defense of these fundamental human rights.

As part of the planned reorganization of the State Department, you explained that the regional bureaus and embassies will subsume the human rights and democracy policy functions and announced the elimination of the Office of the Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights. The proposed plan would also place two Senate-confirmed Assistant Secretaries, including the one responsible for human rights, under a non-Senate confirmed position, the Director of Foreign Assistance. Congress created the Senate-confirmed position of the Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL) to ensure human rights equities were raised at senior levels within the Department.² As currently drafted,

¹ Rubio, M. (2013, April 19). *Senator Rubio Comments On Annual Human Rights Report*.

LegiStorm. https://www.legistorm.com/stormfeed/view_rss/404514/member/2809/title/senator-rubio-comments-on-annual-human-rights-report.html

² 22 U.S.C. §2651a(c)(2)(A)

the plan would relegate DRL from a policy-making bureau to a project manager, and marginalize human rights issues within internal State Department deliberations.

These moves, along with the proposed sunset of the Office of Global Criminal Justice (GCJ) and the consolidation of other human rights-focused offices, undermine the Department's ability to effectively address global human rights abuses and hold perpetrators accountable. The Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor is also the primary implementer of many U.S. laws, including the Leahy Laws, the Uygur Forced Labor Prevention Act, and the Global Magnitsky Act, among others. Deprioritizing these critical functions would signal a retreat from core American values at a time when authoritarian governments like China, Russia, and Iran are aggressively exporting models of repression, censorship, and centralized control. These regimes exploit every opportunity to frame democracy as chaotic and human rights as expendable. If the U.S. abandons its commitment to defending universal rights, we forfeit a key source of our global moral leadership and influence. We will lose credibility among global partners, reformers, and civil society leaders who look to the U.S. for support. In a world increasingly shaped by geopolitical competition, moral clarity and institutional integrity are not luxuries — they are strategic assets.

In addition to these proposed changes, recent reports indicate that the Trump administration is also planning to gut the comprehensive critiques traditionally included in the annual Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, notably eliminating references to serious human rights abuses such as harsh prison conditions, government corruption, restrictions on political freedoms, coercive medical practices, and discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals. Removing mention of these abuses fundamentally weakens the reports' utility and moral authority, and sends a dangerous message that these issues are no longer of concern to the United States. As you have previously conveyed, American inaction emboldens authoritarian regimes and weakens protections for vulnerable communities.

Reportedly, the Trump administration is planning to require a special review by a political appointee for 20 country reports, including El Salvador, Hungary, Egypt, Russia, and others. Introducing political oversight into these reports risks bias and erodes the impartiality that has long defined them. The comprehensive, credible, and impartial information in these official U.S. government reports is essential not just for human rights advocacy, but for notifying Congress, guiding diplomatic engagement, and complying with U.S. foreign assistance program requirements. Stripping these reports down to the bone degrades their value as a tool for accountability.

The proposed changes to gut the State Department's standalone human rights bureau and to emaciate and politicize the United States' signature human rights reports — alongside dramatic cuts to U.S. funding to advance freedom and democracy — are a retreat from America's global leadership to advance freedom in the world. America's standing as a champion for human rights globally relies on a commitment to holding friends and foes alike accountable to the same standards. When the United States conveniently wields human rights principles as a political cudgel against our adversaries, but does not apply those same standards to our allies, countries like China and Russia are quick to point out such hypocrisy, and American influence on the world stage drops precipitously. Making America safer, stronger, and more prosperous requires

embracing human rights as a pillar of U.S. foreign policy and dedicating resources to support that cause.

Sincerely,



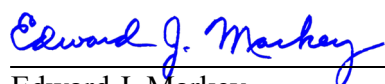
Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator



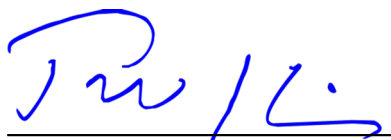
Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator



Cory A. Booker
United States Senator



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator



Tim Kaine
United States Senator



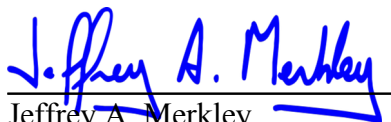
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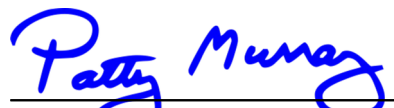
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