

Last month, the Washington Post ran a powerful letter on its opinion page written recently by Khadija where she states that the reason she is in prison is because of the regime's corruption and vows to continue to expose that corruption. Less than a week later the Azeri government suddenly called for a closed-door trial and found her guilty of criminal libel.

To quote her piece in the Post:

The fight between good and evil goes on, and the most important thing is that this fight should not end. If we can continue to reject the thinking that is imposed on us and believe that human dignity is not for sale, then we are the winners, and they, our jailers both inside and outside prison, are the losers.

Sadly, this is just a snapshot of the many brave Azeris or organizations facing trumped-up charges or imprisonment for simply exercising basic political freedoms.

To them, I say, the world is aware of your plight and courage. And to President Aliyev, I urge you to release your own people whose only offense has been to ask for a peaceful democratic Azerbaijan. You cannot be a part of the Western community of democracies while violating its core democratic principles.

Second, Mr. President, is Saudi Arabia—a country that is an important ally to the United States on many issues and yet could not be more different when it comes to basic freedoms.

I have spoken about human rights concerns in Saudi Arabia on the floor before—the troubling lack of freedoms for women and the use of obsolete blasphemy and apostasy laws to stifle freedom of religion and expression.

In 2012, the Saudi Government imprisoned a young blogger named Hamza Kashgari for tweets considered blasphemous.

Fortunately, after nearly 2 years, I was pleased to hear of his release.

Writer and activist Raif Badawi, however, has not been so fortunate.

Also imprisoned in 2012, Raif Badawi was sentenced to 10 years in prison and 1,000 lashes for apparently launching a Web site that suggested a peaceful discussion about religion.

He received his first set of 50 lashes in public on January 9, and spent his 31st birthday in jail, severely wounded.

His wife, Ensaf Haidar, who fled to Canada with their three children after she began receiving anonymous death threats because of her husband's case, fears her husband may not be able to physically withstand another round of lashings.

I was relieved to hear that after international outrage about this treatment as well as serious concern about his health, Raif's next rounds of floggings have been repeatedly postponed. His case was referred to the Supreme Court in Riyadh only to be returned back to the Court of Appeals in Jeddah, where reports indicate he may be retried and even worse, could face the death penalty.

Raif's lawyer, Waleed Abu al-Khair, a prominent human rights activist in his own right and head of the Monitor of Human Rights in Saudi Arabia, was himself arrested and sentenced to 15 years in prison followed by a ban on travel for 15 years.

Also concerning is that his case was taken up by the Specialized Criminal Court in Jeddah, which was created in 2008 to deal with terrorist suspects but has also taken to trying human rights activists on dubious charges.

I sent a letter to Saudi Arabia in January along with several colleagues—Senators LEAHY, SHAHEEN, RUBIO, FEINSTEIN, WYDEN, KIRK, and BOXER—urging the release of both Raif and Waleed.

My staff has also met with Samar Badawi—she is Waleed's wife and Raif's sister, and she is an activist in her own right—it is a whole family of activists. For years she has been a strong advocate for women's rights in Saudi Arabia and has served her own time in jail for it.

In fact, in 2012, she was one of the recipients of the International Women of Courage Award from the State Department.

Samar and others have raised the profile of countless women who have stood up for their rights in a country where zealous interpretations of religion and traditional customs guide Saudi laws, like the one requiring all women to have a male guardian.

The guardianship law automatically restricts Saudi women from driving, as many of you know, but also from making their own choices regarding marriage and divorce, employment, travel, banking, and countless other basic life decisions.

Raif, Waleed, and Samar are only a few of the many independent activists and peaceful dissidents in Saudi Arabia who have faced persecution.

Now, like many of you, I was saddened to hear of the passing of King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz on January 23. Many have described him as a man of vision, peace, and reform.

As his brother, Salman, takes the seat as the new King of Saudi Arabia, I hope he will take every opportunity to free Raif, Waleed, and others jailed on account of their beliefs, to allow greater room for political debate and freedoms, and renounce any further prosecutions under charges of apostasy or blasphemy.

Last, Mr. President, I would like to turn the attention toward Ethiopia, a country I last visited in 2010, when I had the opportunity to meet with then-Prime Minister Meles.

Meles' government made many advances and Ethiopia was and remains an ally and leader a difficult region. It has also received millions over the years in development assistance from the United States.

And yet, Ethiopia continues to be a country with a troubling human rights record, particularly regarding freedom of the press.

Many had hoped that new Ethiopian Prime Minister Hailemariam would bring a change to his late predecessor's human rights policies.

Unfortunately, last July the Ethiopian Government charged six bloggers and three journalists—known collectively as the Zone 9 Bloggers—under a broadly used terrorism law, despite any credible evidence be offered.

Sadly, these bloggers seem to have been arrested to narrow the already small space for free media expression in Ethiopia.

Some of you may have heard of Eskinder Nega, a prominent independent journalist who was critical of the Ethiopian Government and was detained on eight different occasions before being convicted in 2012 on terrorism charges and sentenced to 18 years in prison.

Others may know of Reeyot Alemu, a schoolteacher and columnist with one of Ethiopia's last remaining independent papers was also convicted in 2012 on counts of terrorism and sentenced to 5 years in prison. Reeyot has breast cancer and is in desperate need of urgent and proper medical care beyond what prison can provide.

Both Eskinder and Reeyot have won prestigious international awards for their work while serving prison terms. Both represent the plight of their countless colleagues in the industry who have suffered threats, intimidation, politically motivated prosecutions, and even physical abuse.

I sent a letter with Senators BOXER and MENENDEZ to the Ethiopian Government about the Zone 9 Bloggers last summer and I know Secretary Kerry has also raised their cases. I am troubled to hear that a fair and transparent trial for them only continues to be delayed.

In fact, their case was adjourned 20 times before the group finally had the opportunity to plead not guilty in court last month, only to be adjourned again for March 30, just shortly before the Ethiopian general elections in May.

Prime Minister Hailemariam, you have an opportunity to turn the page on your country's human rights record by reversing a troubling pattern of press harassment.

These are just a few of the many political prisoners around the globe that struggle, often at great risk, for a better future for their fellow countrymen and women and for their children. I want them and their families—and the governments unjustly holding them—to know that they are not forgotten.

I will continue to draw attention to their plight and work for their release, along with my colleagues here in Congress and their countless advocates around the world.

LYNCH NOMINATION

Mr. LEAHY. Mr. President, one great responsibility that distinguishes the U.S. Senate is our constitutional role

of advice and consent. We have a solemn duty to consider nominees for positions of great importance to the Nation, some of which are lifetime appointments. Every day that the nomination of Loretta Lynch to be the next Attorney General awaits a floor vote is another day the Senate fails to function as it should.

The Attorney General is our Nation's top law enforcement official. The position is critical to protecting our national security and our most cherished civil rights. It is a position of honor and one that deserves respect. And even though Senators have not always agreed with the President's choice, there used to be a mutual respect for the position and the process of filling it. That proud history is being debased here in the Senate today. The Republican majority has turned this vital position—and the highly respected nominee—into a bargaining chip to be leveraged for political gain. This is not how to treat a position of such importance to law enforcement and our national security.

When I was chairman of the Judiciary Committee, I did not support the nomination of Michael Mukasey, the choice of President George W. Bush. But I did not obstruct the process or deny the Senate a vote. To the contrary, we treated the position and the nominee with the historic respect they both deserve. Judge Mukasey received a floor vote just 2 days after he was reported from committee and he was confirmed just 53 days after his nomination was announced. That process stands in sharp contrast to that of Ms. Lynch. It has now been 28 days since she was reported out of committee and 137 days since her nomination was first announced.

The treatment of this excellent nominee is beneath the dignity of this body. In January, Ms. Lynch testified before the Senate Judiciary Committee for nearly 8 hours and she responded to nearly 900 written questions. Not a single witness invited by Republicans opposed her nomination. When Republicans stalled consideration of Ms. Lynch's nomination in committee, Democrats noted the unnecessary delay and raised concerns about filling this vital position. Senator CORNYN dismissed this as "faux outrage." But in November 2007, Senator CORNYN complained that a 7-week process on the Mukasey nomination threatened our national security. He issued a press release stating:

It is imperative that the president has his national security team at full strength and the unnecessary delay of Judge Mukasey's nomination has prevented that. He deserves an immediate up-or-down vote by the full Senate.

Loretta Lynch's nomination has now been pending more than 19 weeks. Where is the outrage now? Where is the concern for the President's national security team to be at full strength?

Similarly, in early October 2007—just 3 weeks after Mr. Mukasey's nomina-

tion was announced, the Republican leader criticized me for not yet having set a hearing date, saying that Democrats should "not hold Judge Mukasey hostage while they play partisan games." That was after 3 weeks. We are now on week 19 for Ms. Lynch—that is more than six times as long and Senator MCCONNELL has openly linked her confirmation to partisan politics by linking her vote to demands on legislation.

Senate Republicans' handling of the nomination process for the Nation's top law enforcement officer has been disgraceful. And all of this after Senate Democrats agreed not to process her nomination during the lameduck because the current majority leader reassured us that she would be treated fairly. Unfortunately, that has not been the case. No one can deny that Ms. Lynch is eminently qualified for the job. No one can deny that her nomination is a historic one. No one can deny that her record safeguarding our Nation from terrorists and criminals is beyond reproach. And no one can deny—based on the objective numbers—that she is being treated worse than her predecessors. Ms. Lynch has been treated unfairly compared to previous Attorneys General nominees by whatever metric one chooses.

Republicans are holding back a top Federal prosecutor who has an unparalleled record keeping Americans safe from terrorists. During her tenure as U.S. attorney, the Eastern District of New York has prosecuted significant terrorism cases. This includes the successful prosecution of six individuals for their roles in a 2009 Al Qaeda plot to attack the New York subway system; the convictions of four terrorists plotting to attack John F. Kennedy Airport; and the conviction of a terrorist who attempted to detonate an explosive device at the New York Federal Reserve.

Rudy Giuliani, the former Republican Mayor of New York and a proud law-and-order conservative, urged the Senate last week to end the delay and to confirm Ms. Lynch. He said:

This woman is entitled to confirmation: not as a woman, not as a man, but as a highly qualified candidate . . . Loretta Lynch is more than qualified. She's overqualified to be attorney general.

My friend Louis Freeh, former Director of the FBI and Federal judge, has written that "[i]n my twenty-five years of public service—23 in the Department of Justice—I cannot think of a more qualified nominee to be America's chief law enforcement officer." He has further stated that "Ms. Lynch is an atypically non-political appointment for that office, a career professional without any political party ties or activity."

If we do not confirm Ms. Lynch before the upcoming recess, her nomination will be pending before the full Senate for 46 days by the time we return on April 13. That is nearly twice as long as all of the past seven Attor-

neys General combined: Richard Thornburgh, 1 day; William Barr, 5 days; Janet Reno, 1 day; John Ashcroft, 2 days; Alberto Gonzales, 8 days; Michael Mukasey, 2 days; and Eric Holder, 5 days. This delay is an embarrassment for the U.S. Senate.

I am concerned that the Senate will have to file a cloture motion and vote to overcome a filibuster of Ms. Lynch's nomination. This would be unprecedented and unwarranted. No Attorney General nomination in our history has ever been met with a filibuster. We have never needed a cloture vote for an Attorney General nomination. It appears that Senate Republicans want to make history for all the wrong reasons. It is time to stop playing politics and lead.

JUDICIAL CONFIRMATIONS

Mr. LEAHY. Mr. President, we are now three months into the new Congress with Republicans in the majority. The Republican reign thus far has been defined by an attempt to shut down the Department of Homeland Security; a refusal to even allow a floor vote on an eminently qualified nominee for Attorney General; and the decision to inject a partisan abortion fight in what is otherwise an uncontroversial bill to build on our efforts to combat human trafficking. On top of all of this, the Senate Republican Leadership has been unwilling to bring up for a vote any of the judicial nominees pending on the Executive Calendar. Not one.

The refusal by the Senate Republican leadership to schedule votes on any Federal judges is completely contrary to historical precedent. This is also in stark contrast to the way Democrats treated President Bush's judicial nominees. During the Bush administration we were able to reduce overall judicial vacancies from 110 down to 28. In the 17 months I chaired the Senate Judiciary Committee during President Bush's first 2 years in office, the Senate confirmed 100 Federal circuit and district court judges. I also served as chairman of the Judiciary Committee during the last 2 years of the Bush administration and continued to hold regular hearings on judges and we confirmed 68 district and circuit court judges in those last 2 years.

The Senate must continue to fulfill its constitutional obligation of advice and consent. The fact that we are in the last 2 years of this presidency does not mean our work is done. In the last 2 years of the Clinton administration, 73 judges were confirmed, and in the last 2 years of the Reagan administration, 83 judges were confirmed. I have heard Senate Republicans state that 11 of the judges confirmed in the lame duck last year should count towards confirmations this year. That is a bizarre claim. Prior Congresses have always confirmed consensus nominees prior to long recesses. And Senate Democrats were only forced to do so because Republican obstruction had