



CIVIL COURAGE PRIZE

Introduction by Andrew Gilmour

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The message I want to share with you tonight is that for many people there is currently a frightening backlash against human rights, civil liberties, and dignity. This is what makes the Civil Courage Prize more important now than it has ever been before.

Forty years ago, at school, the two prisoners of conscience that our Amnesty group was allocated included a Jehovah's witness, who was serving time under the Greek Colonels for being a conscientious objector, and a Soviet dissident imprisoned in a psychiatric ward in the Gulag. The first lesson I got from that was balance: the need to uphold civil courage against both sides in the Cold War.

The second was learning how much people who defend human rights can irritate other people. Either because those others are not that interested in human rights or alternatively because somehow they feel it threatens them. At my traditional boarding school I was considered a "trendy leftie" for being in Amnesty. But at my rather left wing college, I remember being called an "imperialist bastard" by some Trotskyites who thought Amnesty was undermining their cause.

Since then of course, there have been immense changes in the world. Latin American and other dictators disappeared, as did the Soviet system, while most of the Cold War proxy wars came to an end. Progress went on I think until 9/11, at which point, for understandable reasons, a number of governments decided that the most important thing to do was to take up the cause of counterterrorism. In the process, they committed immense violations of human rights and also, under the guise to counter-terrorism, managed to create way more terrorists than there were before they started. Obviously, the invasion of Iraq would be exhibit A in any act that created terrorists. But many other countries too, in Africa, the Middle-East, and elsewhere, carried out actions with a sort of bovine harshness, killing, torturing, imprisoning thousands of people, many of whom had nothing whatever to do with terrorism. And at the same time creating deep resentment, including among the very groups who they should have been working closely with to stop acts of terrorism. Instead, the resentments they created led to so many more terrorists. That has been a leitmotif of the last few years.

Regarding the backlash against human rights, a clear case is the Philippines where thousands of people, many either innocent bystanders or casual drug users, have been gunned down in the streets by state agents, and where the president of the country has been ghoulishly boasting that he has personally participated in some of those extrajudicial executions, and also encouraging his soldiers to carry out the rape of village women.

In Europe, the response to the migration and refugee crisis has fallen far short of European ideals of human rights, plus there is the alarming rise of far right-wing parties. And in this country, there was a candidate for office who said, "I like torture". Not in the way of, "I have to reluctantly condone torture", but instead saying actively "I like torture." When one has that person reaching the highest office and then using that office to whip up hatred against certain groups in this country, then I think there is a strong case to be made for ensuring that civil courage is as strongly appreciated here as it is elsewhere.

But luckily it is present here. Indeed, we have seen some very strong actions already. Something that I found deeply moving was in January, after the Muslim Ban was suddenly issued, while passengers were in the air, thousands of Americans flocked to U.S. international airports to ensure that the refugees who arrived received support and legal advice. It was an incredible act.

Another instance was last May, in Portland, Oregon. When a racist thug started abusing two young Muslim girls, three men went up to him to stop it, and he killed two of them. That was a great act of civil courage. And so it's here already, and I think we are going to need more of it in the months to come.

Because what we are seeing around the world today is an antagonistic nationalism, and a cheap populism. And this trend is usually anti-foreigner and anti-minorities, seeking out victims from what are already the most vulnerable groups of society. And harking back to some mythical idyllic age when women, when minorities (whether sexual, or racial, or religious minorities) "knew their place," whether it was the kitchen, the closet, the ghetto or simply abroad. And where rights and liberties were reserved for the very privileged few.

The backlash that I've been referring to takes its toll on the upholders of civil courage and the defenders of human rights in many ways. One is that a number of countries (e.g. Russia, Israel, Egypt, Turkey, Kenya, India, Ethiopia and many others) have passed harsh laws to prevent NGOs from doing their work. These are governments often led by people who find it somehow threatening that people should be claiming their rights up for themselves or defending the rights of others.

Another is the area of reprisals, a topic that I follow very closely as I am also the UN focal point for those people who suffer reprisals for cooperating with the UN on human rights. I've recently been in Colombia and Honduras, and saw how indigenous leaders of people defending their land rights of their communities are very much at risk and indeed many have been killed in reprisal for their work.

There is also the terrible case of Ibrahim Metwally, whose son was taken away from him, and probably tortured and killed by the Egyptian security forces, two years ago. He set up an organization on disappearances and he was coming to meet us in Geneva this month, but instead was arrested at Cairo airport. We fear he too was tortured, and he is charged with "terrorism", probably because of his work on disappearances in his country.

Other methods of reprisals against the upholders of civil courage include travel bans, denial of medical assistance, rape, or worst of all, murder.

Three weeks ago, I addressed the Human Rights Council in Geneva on this very question. I described these brave defenders who suffer reprisals as "canaries bravely singing in the coal mine, until they are silenced by the toxic backlash against rights and dignity as a dark warning to us all". I said it was abhorrent that year after year, we have to go back to the Human Rights Council to tell them that their

own members are abusing people who have cooperated with the UN. And I concluded by saying that I could conceive of no higher or more self-evident duty on the part of any of us than to do more to defend the defenders.

I wanted to share some of these same thoughts with you. Because I do think this is exactly what this prize is all about, and other such prizes, such as the Martin Ennals prize, which our distinguished awardee of tonight won 10 years ago. I have described why I think this prize is so important. So thank you, John, for promoting and rewarding civil courage. As the backlash that I've been talking about gathers momentum, so must the resistance to it.

I think it is increasingly clear to many of us that it is now a vital civic duty to promote and reward civil courage. I am grateful to you for allowing me to tell you tonight why I think that's the case.