



**Senator Peter Welch  
Remarks as Delivered  
On the Importance of Releasing Political Prisoners  
December 10, 2024**

Madam President, you know I want to thank Senator Durbin for his ongoing commitment to highlighting the plights of people who have been abandoned for doing nothing more than exercising free speech. For doing nothing more than speaking up on behalf of oppressed in their own country. For speaking up on behalf of human rights and justice. And what Senator Durbin said inspires me, and that is: we don't know what the outcome will be. Is anyone is paying attention—we don't know.

But what we do know, and we have seen, is that this does help in make a difference and get some attention on people who were unjustly imprisoned for doing something that's noble. And our goal here is not always to have everything be instrumental immediately. But it is to reassert the commitment that this United States Senate has to do what is within our power—and sometimes it's very limited, as in this case, of advocacy and attention—to highlight and hopefully result in the highlighting of an oppressive situation to have a release of a person who's been unjustly detained.

So, I just want to express my gratitude to Senator Durbin. And, over the years, I've met people who used to be political prisoners and were shaking the hand of Senator Durbin, and his advocacy made a difference. The advocacy of other members of the Senate makes a difference.

And the most compelling thing for me is: just think of what it is like to be a person who has made a statement, who used Twitter—you're suddenly arrested. You're suddenly cut off from your family. You're suddenly cut off from any visitation. You have no idea whether you have a future. And you have to feel, day in and day out, in that captivity, that people have completely forgotten who you are. You become invisible. So, the act of trying to make visible people—who as a result of the use of state power have

been made invisible—is something that each and every one of us should do our best, using this office that we have and this forum we have, to stand up and remember people who have been made forgotten because they’ve done decent things.

I’m really grateful to work with you, Senator Durbin, on this, and I want to focus attention on other political prisoners.

And the first is Maryia Kalesnikava. And Maria is a professional musician—think about that. A gifted musician, think of the discipline that goes into becoming a professional discipline. She was admired throughout Belarus for her talents and as a leading member of the political opposition. She left aside just being a musician to speak out on behalf of her people. She called for free and fair elections. Arrest follows. After every leading opposition candidate had either been jailed in Belarus, or fled the country, Maryia was apprehended in 2020 by officials driving an unmarked vehicle and taken to the Belarus border where they attempted to forcibly deport her to Ukraine.

Shortly after that—she wouldn’t allow herself to be forcibly deported. Think about that. She had to risk coming back when she was in the custody of unknown people who had no good intention for her. They put her on trial, and she was tried, and she was sentenced to 11 years in a penal colony. 11 years for the crime of calling for free and fair elections. Her situation is obviously concerning for many reasons, not the least of which between February 2023 and November 2024—a year and nine months—she was not allowed any visits by her family. I mean just think about that—your son or your daughter is cut off from you and you have no idea how they’re doing, whether they’re alive, are they suffering. Only after nearly 600 days was Maryia’s father finally permitted to visit her last month.

I’m speaking about this with some passion because I met her sister just recently. Her sister, Tatsiana, came to my office and she has been out and about telling her sister’s story and seeking for her release. Tatsiana was joined in my office by two human rights defenders who are courageously working to help secure the release of Maryia and other Belarusian political prisoners.

There have been a small number of Belarusian prisoners convicted of “extremism” who have been released. And I am hopeful that Maryia will also be

released. And while the United States and Belarus have profound disagreements, including over human rights and Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine, I believe that officials of both governments should speak respectfully towards each other and seek opportunities to work together to address issues of common interest. And my hope is that her release will be one of them.

Madam President, second, I want to speak about Maykel "Osorbo" Castillo. Maykel is an Afro-Cuban musician and writer who won a Latin Grammy Award while imprisoned in a Cuban jail. How do you do that? He won a Latin Grammy while he was in jail. He helped write a hit pro-democracy anthem that won Song of the Year at the 2021 Latin Grammys. One of the things that's so extraordinary about folks like this who are wrongly imprisoned is that it doesn't somehow quell their spirit to express themselves and their joy of life. Maykel is definitely one of them.

He was arrested in May 2021, following months of police harassment, including intensive surveillance, movement restrictions, and "preventative" detention. And he was sentenced a year later on politically motivated charges of evading police custody and sharing social media critical of the government. Maykel is one of the many who have been unjustly imprisoned, and I urge the Cuban Government to release him. I also hope the incoming Trump Administration will not do what many fear, which is to tighten—really a lot of—further sanctions on Cuba even more.

Finally, I want to mention Dr. Salah Soltan. Salah is a 65-year-old U.S. Permanent Resident, academic scholar, and prisoner of conscience in Egypt. And Dr. Salah has quite a smile, as you can see. He's a husband, he's a father, he's a grandfather to 11 grandchildren—American citizens, by the way—with deep roots in Michigan and in the Midwest. He's been unjustly imprisoned for 12 years, and he is in fragile health.

In recent years, there has been a growing bicameral, bipartisan, domestic, regional, and international support for his release on medical and on humanitarian grounds. President Sisi has taken some modest steps towards justice for political prisoners—including removing more than 700 Egyptians with tangible ties to opposition political parties from domestic terrorism lists. That's good, what President Sisi did. We

want him and urge him to release Salah on humanitarian grounds so he can rejoin his family in the United States.

Madam President, these are only three of the tens and probably hundreds of thousands of prisoners of conscience in the world. The arbitrary arrest and imprisonment of individuals for nothing more than peacefully expressing views in support of democracy, in support of freedom of expression, and other human rights, is abhorrent. These folks are accused of all sorts of fabricated charges, and it's really the use of the awesome power of a state to essentially oppress people who are critical of the state. These folks are apprehended, they're subject oftentimes to inhumane conditions—often solitary confinement—in decrepit prisons without access to lawyers or families. They're erased—they become invisible, as Senator Durbin was discussing. And some of these folks die in prison from torture or untreated medical conditions.

So, any time we can raise the possibility of their getting some attention so their case can be heard, so they have some possibility of release, is a good use of our time. The question about why we do it kind of surprises me, actually, because the answer is simple: Americans care about people whose fundamental rights are denied. And whoever and wherever they are we should continue to express that concern.

And I'm proud to say that that's certainly a legacy of my predecessor, Senator Patrick Leahy, who served in this body for 48 years. In fact, that right is every person's responsibility under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which no country voted against when it was adopted on December 10<sup>th</sup>, 1948, 66 years ago today.

So, I want to finish where I started by thanking my colleague from Illinois, but not just for his advocacy, but for his inspiration to all of us to do what we can with this office—that we hold for whatever period of time we've been entrusted—to speak out on behalf of wonderful people, like the people I mentioned, and Senator Durbin mentioned.

Madam President, I yield back to my colleague, Senator Durbin.

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