

Commission on Unalienable Rights: Lessons Learned

By [Peter Berkowitz](#) & [Mary Ann Glendon](#)

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Last month, the head of the world's largest independent Muslim organization sent Secretary of State Mike Pompeo a gracious letter thanking him for his recent visit to Indonesia -- home to the world's largest Muslim population -- to discuss the [report](#) of the Commission on Unalienable Rights.

The visit and the letter vindicate Secretary Pompeo's decision in the summer of 2019 to establish the commission to review the principles of freedom that inform America's founding commitment to the rights inherent in all persons. By recounting the history of those universal principles and of the United States' struggle to honor them at home and champion them abroad, the commission aimed to call Americans to what is best in our country's traditions and to invite other peoples and nations to draw on their own heritages to renew a shared dedication to human rights. The secretary's Jakarta visit and the letter from the general secretary of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) furnish an inspiring example of the exciting opportunities for which the commission's work has laid the foundations.

"Your remarks resonated deeply within Indonesian society, which has a natural predisposition to agree with the approach you advocate for positioning unalienable rights at the heart of a rules-based international order," wrote NU's Yahya Cholil Staquf to the U.S. secretary of state. "That is why we have unreservedly embraced the Report of the Commission on Unalienable Rights and urged our allies at Centrist Democrat International to do likewise." Further encouragement for the commission's approach, General Secretary Staquf emphasized, was provided by CDI's adoption of a resolution endorsing "the U.S. Department of State's Report of the Commission on Unalienable Rights and its re-affirmation of the spirit and substance of fundamental human rights."

NU's partnership with Centrist Democrat International in defense of human rights is itself heartening. With members drawn primarily from Europe and Latin America, CDI promotes policies flowing from a blend of traditional Christian values with freedom and democracy. That a broad-based organization with roots in the West and a Muslim organization headquartered in the Indo-Pacific find common ground in cherishing the rights shared by all human beings attests to the compatibility of respect for national traditions and distinctive faiths with those core rights no government may legitimately impair.

In aspiring "to deepen and expand our collaboration," Sheikh Staquf included with his letter to Secretary Pompeo "an early Christmas gift: the manuscript of a newly completed anthology that will be published in print and electronic format next year." The nearly 700-page volume "will introduce readers to the foundational documents and civilizational context of Humanitarian Islam and the Movement for Shared Civilizational Values." NU's long-term aim is "to mobilize people

of good will of every faith and nation to implement a global strategy to block the political weaponization of identity and thereby avert a devastating clash within and between civilizations.”

Because the work of the Commission on Unalienable Rights forms a crucial part of Nahdlatul Ulama’s global strategy, Sheikh Staquf stated that the anthology contains “a 40-page excerpt from the Commission’s report” in a section called “Western Humanism, Christian Democracy and Humanitarian Islam: An Alliance for the 21st Century.”

The success of the Commission on Unalienable Rights in reaching across national boundaries and religious faiths to fortify alliances in support of human rights confutes the dark predictions of the commission’s many critics. Before the commission had even begun its work, a coalition of 251 NGOs, human rights activists, former senior government officials, faith-based leaders, professors, and others sent Secretary Pompeo an [open letter](#) condemning “the Commission’s stated purpose, which we find harmful to the global effort to protect the rights of all people and a waste of resources.” This was the beginning of a barrage of accusations, no small amount coming from Capitol Hill. The critics impugned Secretary Pompeo’s motives. They portrayed commission members as religious fanatics (paradoxically because of our commitment to religious liberty). And they decried the commission’s mandate -- to reground America’s dedication to human rights in the nation’s founding principles and constitutional traditions, which include the embrace of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights -- as playing into the hands of authoritarians everywhere.

Six months after the report’s publication, it is gratifying to observe that contrary to critics’ apocalyptic prophecies, the commission’s report has provided an occasion for nations and peoples across the globe to reaffirm the centrality of human rights and build new international coalitions to protect them.

In the coming days, having produced the report it was asked to undertake, and -- through writings, online seminars, and in-country visits -- having presented its analysis to a variety of audiences at home and abroad, the commission will terminate its official duties under federal law. A government document, the commission’s report is available on the Policy Planning Staff’s State Department [webpage](#) along with [translations](#) of the report into eight languages. In addition, the webpage contains links to [classics of freedom and democracy](#) mentioned by the report. These too have been translated into multiple languages. We hope that administrations to follow will build on our work.

At the same time, we are pleased to announce that the University of Notre Dame’s [Kellogg Institute for International Studies](#) will provide the commission’s report and accompanying documents a second home. Commission member Paolo Carozza, a professor at Notre Dame Law School and also director of the Kellogg Institute, plans to host a conference later this year to consider ways to carry forward the commission’s work. We expect to welcome colleagues from across the country and from around the world.

“To build on the momentum generated by your visit to Jakarta,” NU General Secretary Staquf wrote in the conclusion of his letter to Secretary Pompeo, “I would like to explore with you, at an

appropriate time, potential strategies to ensure that the vision articulated in the Report of the Commission on Unalienable Rights will continue to serve as an inspiration and catalyst for strengthening the global human rights architecture.”

We look forward to working with NU General Secretary Staquf, Secretary Pompeo, fellow commission members, and friends of freedom everywhere to widen the circle of those who understand that the surest defense of human freedom and dignity is grounded in respect for the rights inherent in all persons.

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