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President George W. Bush
The White House
Washington, DC

Dear Mr. President:

We applaud the commitment you expressed in your recent West Point graduation speech to defend human rights throughout the world, and particularly in the Islamic world. As you made clear, an effective campaign against terrorist violence depends on keeping open "legal avenues of dissent for all groups that pursue their aspirations without violence."

This message has been missing from America's Middle East diplomacy in recent years. As a result, limits to peaceful dissent have gone largely unchallenged. And America has risked being associated in the eyes of millions of people in the region with governments that do not respect the rule of law, the rights of women, free speech or religious diversity. We hope that your eloquent words signal a new approach, one that will be reflected in effective American policies to promote human rights and democratic reforms in the Middle East. For that to happen, your message will need to be fully integrated in U.S. diplomacy, from the efforts of American diplomats on the ground to the agendas of your own bilateral summits with regional leaders.

A critical opportunity to reinforce the argument you made at West Point will come when you meet this week with President Mubarak of Egypt. The current proposed new law on associations is particularly troublesome to those in the democracy and human rights community. As stated in a recent press release by the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, the proposed new law blurs the important distinction between regulation of organizations -- a legitimate state interest -- and domination of non-governmental groups that would destroy their independent character. In short, the law imposes excessive restrictions that will make it virtually impossible for a non-governmental organization in Egypt to be both legally registered and independent. The Ministry of Social Affairs would have the ability to block nominees for a non-governmental organization's board of directors, the right to dissolve an association and seize its assets without the right of judicial appeal, and must give prior approval to non-governmental organizations wishing to receive financial support from foreign

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institutions, or wishing to affiliate with international organizations or coalitions. Moreover, the law has a vague prohibition on non-governmental organizations engaging in “political activity,” which may be interpreted to include publicly criticizing the government or government officials in any way.

Egypt needs to establish the open legal avenues of dissent that you articulated so forcefully. The current proposed law is unduly restrictive and counterproductive. We respectfully urge you to raise the issue with President Mubarak during his visit.

Sincerely,

Tom Carothers

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