Dear President Biden,

The upcoming COP27 Summit represents a critical next step in cementing the United States’ bold new commitments on climate action made at last year’s summit. Importantly, it is an opportunity to ensure that all stakeholders in the global fight against climate change are heard, including civil society. Civil society organizations play a critical role in promoting government accountability, connecting grassroots efforts across the globe, and translating climate policies to the broader population, particularly marginalized groups that bear the brunt of climate impacts. We are therefore deeply troubled by the message it sends to the world that the Egyptian government is hosting COP27 while imprisoning tens of thousands of political prisoners – including many environmental activists. With the world’s attention on Sharm el-Sheikh this month, COP27 presents a unique opportunity for the United States to press the Egyptian government to release these activists and demonstrate its commitment to inclusive engagement with the full range of stakeholders on climate solutions.

Egypt’s record of egregious human rights violations is inconsistent with what the United States should expect from a key international security partner. There are tens of thousands of political prisoners in Egypt, most of whom are reportedly held in brutal, inhumane conditions. Widespread arbitrary detentions, restrictions on members of the media and non-governmental organizations, and the crackdown on the government’s political opponents cannot be ignored while Egypt enjoys a spotlight on the world stage. Despite taking some limited steps in response to international criticism, in recent months the Egyptian government has continued to conduct thousands of new arrests and renew pretrial detention for current detainees.

Environmental groups in Egypt are deeply concerned over the government’s harassment of civil society leaders and restrictions on the rights to peacefully protest and assemble ahead of the world’s premier climate summit. As the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights found in October, “arrests and detention, NGO asset freezes and dissolutions and travel restrictions against human rights defenders have created a climate of fear for Egyptian civil society organizations to engage visibly at the COP27.” Members of civil society seeking to participate in the upcoming climate summit have reported intimidation from Egyptian security officials, undue visa processing delays, burdensome regulations for accreditation as an NGO in the country, and other restrictions limiting their ability to participate.

We recognize that the Global South—including the Middle East and North Africa—is disproportionately affected by climate change, particularly among its most vulnerable
populations. Egypt suffers from acute water scarcity, rising sea levels, deadly air pollution, rapid degradation of green and natural spaces, and all amid record high and increasing temperatures. We also recognize that Egypt is committed to demonstrating leadership on issues, such as loss and damage, that are of critical importance to those countries currently suffering from the adverse consequences of climate change. But Egypt’s capacity to push forward these demands is undercut by its refusal to allow the meaningful participation of environmental and civil society groups, activists, and those most impacted by the climate crisis.

We urge the Administration to engage the Egyptian government to allow the full participation of civil society throughout this year’s summit. This includes ensuring that both participants and observers, including groups critical of the government, have access to engage and express their positions freely at COP27. This simply cannot occur with the unprecedented detention of leading environmental activists and prominent political prisoners. Therefore, we urge the Administration to call for the immediate and unconditional release of all those detained in Egypt for exercising their rights to freedom of expression, and should raise the following cases with Egyptian officials for special attention: political activists Alaa Abdel Fattah and Ahmed Douma, human rights lawyer Mohamed el Baqer, blogger Mohamed “Oxygen” Ibrahim, former presidential candidate Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh, Seif and Safwan Thabet, and environmentalist Ahmed Amasha.

The COP27 conference presents not just an opportunity for the world to come together to confront climate change through collective action, but also brings a responsibility to ensure that commitments and policies are inclusive of all members of society. The United States and Egypt have a long-standing and historic bilateral relationship built on shared interests in regional security, stability, and prosperity. Given that strong partnership, the U.S. must send a clear message that respect for human rights and civil society is a core dimension of both U.S. national security interests and our collective ambitions toward climate action.

We thank you for your consideration on this important issue.

Sincerely,

Christopher S. Murphy
United States Senator

David N. Cicilline
Member of Congress
Chair, Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa and Global Counterterrorism
Jeffrey A. Merkley  
United States Senator

William R. Keating  
Member of Congress  
Chair, Subcommittee on Europe, Energy, the Environment, and Cyber

Karen Bass  
Member of Congress

Donald S. Beyer Jr.  
Member of Congress

Cory A. Booker  
United States Senator

Jamaal Bowman, Ed.D.  
Member of Congress

Richard Blumenthal  
United States Senator

Sherrod Brown  
United States Senator

Salud Carbajal  
Member of Congress

Benjamin L. Cardin  
United States Senator
Edward J. Markey
United States Senator

James P. McGovern
Member of Congress

Grace Meng
Member of Congress

Eleanor Holmes Norton
Member of Congress

Ilhan Omar
Member of Congress

Alex Padilla
United States Senator

Lucille Roybal-Allard
Member of Congress

Bernard Sanders
United States Senator

Brian Schatz
United States Senator

Adam B. Schiff
Member of Congress
Jan Schakowsky  
Member of Congress

Albio Sires  
Member of Congress

Mark Takano  
Member of Congress

Dina Titus  
Member of Congress

Rashida Tlaib  
Member of Congress

Ritchie Torres  
Member of Congress

Juan Vargas  
Member of Congress

Chris Van Hollen  
United States Senator

Elizabeth Warren  
United States Senator

Bonnie Watson Coleman  
Member of Congress
Peter Welch
Member of Congress

Sheldon Whitehouse
United States Senator

Susan Wild
Member of Congress

Nikema Williams
Member of Congress