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Chair

Mr. Scott Reid

Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

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● (1310)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC)): Welcome to this 58th sitting of the Subcommittee of International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development, on November 27, 2012.

[*English*]

It's also the 12th anniversary of the day I was elected for the first time.

We are televised today, so bear that in mind. Don't do or say anything that you wouldn't want your mom to see.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), we're studying religious freedom in Indonesia. Our witness today is Irshad Manji, who is of course not Indonesian but Canadian, and has relevant testimony on this subject and, I might add, on many other subjects as well, if you have the interest.

Today I finished reading or listening to her audiobook, *The Trouble with Islam*. I just want to say that normally when you hear somebody at the beginning of an audiobook say they're going to narrate their own book, that's an alarming prospect, but she is one of only two people I've heard who do a really good job as a book narrator. The other one was Barack Obama, so that's not bad company, I suppose, all things considered.

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): It's definitely not bad company, all things considered.

The Chair: At any rate, we're about to begin, but I see that Mr. Sweet would like to say something.

Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC): I only interrupt now because once Madam Manji starts, everybody will be captivated, and I'll never get the attention back.

In case the other members of the committee didn't know, the Canadian-led human rights resolution on the situation of human rights in Iran passed at the UN General Assembly Third Committee today with a “yes” vote of 83, a “no” vote of 31, and 68 abstentions. I think that's news everybody would want to hear.

The Chair: All right. Thank you.

Without further ado, let's turn things over to our witness.

Once you have finished your testimony, Ms. Manji, we'll then go to questions. The amount of time for each question will of course be determined by the amount of time divided by the number of people who are here.

I invite you to begin, please.

Ms. Irshad Manji (Director, Moral Courage Project): *Merci bien*.

Thank you very much, everyone, and good afternoon.

[*Translation*]

I am very proud to be here today.

[*English*]

That will be the extent of my French today. I hope, therefore, the translators will know that I'll be speaking slowly enough to make it sensible to them as much as to you.

I'm truly honoured to be back on my old stomping ground. I was telling the clerk of the subcommittee that I used to work here as a legislative aide many years ago, and despite the fact that I now work and live in New York City my love of Parliament has never diminished, including some of the friendships that I have around this table.

The topic you have asked me to address today is very important, as all topics are, of course, that you wish to explore further, but I would argue that this one, Indonesia, has heightened importance to the world, not just to Canada, given that Indonesia is the world's largest Muslim majority country and indeed only five years ago could claim credibly to be a role model of democracy for Muslims worldwide.

That can no longer be said with any credibility. I will say more about the new state of affairs in just a moment, but let me give you some background about where I'm coming from. I grew up in Canada and attended a madrassa—a religious school—in the Vancouver area for several years from about 1975 to 1981. That is where I began asking very simple but apparently inconvenient questions, questions relevant to Canadian multiculturalism and diversity, questions such as: “Why can we Muslims not take Jews and Christians as friends? Please explain that to me.”

But after asking one too many of these sorts of questions, I was expelled from my madrassa at the age of 14. However, I didn't leave Islam, because I decided that this particular educator might be giving us wrong information, and so I took advantage of something that we call the public library—pre-Google days, you might remember—and every Saturday when I was no longer welcome at the madrassa, I would take these hours and spend them at the public library, reading up on religion and culture, as much as I possibly could.

That is where I realized that Islam itself has a progressive and pluralistic tradition of independent thinking, of questioning and of reinterpreting, and that tradition, which, by the way, most Muslims are not even aware of, let alone non-Muslims, is known as "ijtihad". Yes, it sounds eerily like "jihad" to many non-Arab ears; it comes from the same root, which means "to struggle". But unlike any concept of violent struggle, ijtihad is all about struggling with the mind in order to comprehend the wider world, and this is precisely the tradition that was demonstrated to me five years ago in Indonesia.

Five years ago, I went to that country to introduce the Indonesian version of the book to which Mr. Reid referred, *The Trouble With Islam Today*, and I remember very clearly that at the launch, held at their national public library, both the Muslim extremists and the transsexuals came out to the event, and everybody you could imagine in between, and they disagreed on this or that with me, and they disagreed on this and that with each other. But as far as I knew, everybody went home safely. Debate was civil. In between, Javanese dancers kicked up their heels. Guitarists strummed. Poetry was recited. It was a brilliant demonstration of ijtihad in action.

● (1315)

Five years later, just this past May, my colleague and I went back to Indonesia, this time to discuss the newest ideas that, as a Muslim reformer, I'm engaging a young global audience about. Our experiences could not have been more different as compared with five years ago.

On the first night we arrived, I was informed that my book will not be carried by the major chain in Indonesia for no other reason than security concerns.

The very next night, I began doing my public appearances. The first one happened in Jakarta, a cosmopolitan city. No more than five minutes into this presentation, at a vibrant community centre where the auditorium was filled with young Muslims eager to hear and discuss peacefully, a police officer stopped the proceedings. He said that he was representing the community, who did not want me to be there.

Not two minutes later, a group by the name of the FPI—in English, we would call them the Islamic Defenders Front—arrived, 80 members strong, demanding that they shut everything down.

The young people, who were there to hear me out, argued back: over the last number of years, bit by bit, we have been giving away our freedoms under our constitution, and it will stop now.

The organizers pulled me up to the third floor of this community centre, with windows about as large as the ones in this committee room. The rage being expressed by Islamist extremists was so loud and so intense that I could hear those windows, three floors up, rattling and shaking.

When I finally was safe enough to exit from that building, accompanied by human rights lawyers, these lawyers and the organizers of the event quickly had our hotels changed. It was now obvious that we needed far more security than what we had at the relatively bargain-priced hotel we'd checked into. The reason I bring this up is that hours later it was reported to us that the chief of the Jakarta police, his office, tweeted out the name of our new hotel.

The point is that corruption in the country of Indonesia, the complicity between the security forces and the political class, has become far deeper than we would know even by reading articles about these issues.

I will jump now to the next and almost final point in my testimony.

That wasn't the worst of the attacks that my colleague and I experienced on this visit. The worst of them happened a few days later, in what can only really be called.... To be Canadian about it, I'll use the name "Waterloo" as opposed to, say, "Berkeley". When I speak about these issues in the United States, I describe it as the Berkeley of Indonesia. But in this case, let's call it the Waterloo of Indonesia—a small, liberal university town, mostly always quiet. I was speaking at a community centre there.

This time, about an hour into the proceedings, a hundred, possibly more, religious extremists—on motorbikes this time—bashed down the security gates. We saw immediately that they were wearing riot gear. How convenient: they could not be identified. Worst of all, they were wielding iron crowbars and smashing everything in sight, including people's heads.

● (1320)

My colleague was cornered, and they took a huge whack at her arm, dislocating her vertebrae in the process. She, along with six others, had to be rushed to the hospital immediately afterwards, and those six others, by the way, sustained head injuries. The only reason I emerged from this unscathed is that a few exceptionally courageous young Indonesians—most of them women, I will add—surrounded my body with theirs, creating literally a human shield, knowing that their bodies would be the first to be injured if the extremists, who were shouting, "Where is Manji?", found their answer.

We of course have kept in touch with many of the human rights activists on the ground since May, and they have asked us in no uncertain terms to bring this message to all of you: that there is a movement, what they themselves are calling a moral courage movement, to reclaim the freedoms that have been given away under their secular constitution over the last few years. But they need our help, and the way they tell us that we can help is for high-level political people such as you, politicians, yes, but diplomats too, to put pressure on the Indonesian government to accept an independent investigation by the UN special rapporteur on freedom of belief to look at what has happened to freedom in that country in the last half-decade and begin open conversations about these issues with Indonesians themselves.

I'll say one final thing, if I may, and no doubt we'll get into these issues further during the question period. There's no doubt that many factors are in play here. It's not simply of course a weak leadership under the current president of Indonesia. That is a huge part of it, but there's more: Saudi money. Saudi petrodollars are flowing into Indonesia at record levels. We see this even when we arrive at the airport in Jakarta: wealthy Saudis, or those from the Persian Gulf, and their Indonesian assistants schlepping the luggage. You see it with your own eyes.

There is also globalization, the relatively free movement now of capital and technology, and when you take this into consideration, you see that what the Indonesian government is seeking to do is create an image of stability for Indonesia so that overseas investors will see this country as a safe place to invest. But here's the paradox. Stability is achieved not by cracking down on religious extremists but by cracking down on human rights activists who have the courage to talk and speak up about extremism. Therein lies the complicity between the political class and security enforcement.

I have to believe that, at the very least, Canadians at your level of influence can help bring a special rapporteur into Indonesia for further discussion. If and when that happens, you can count on human rights activists and people who don't yet consider themselves as such but who desperately want their country back. You can count on them to do a lot of the work thereafter.

I'll end on that note. I welcome your questions.

Thank you very much.

● (1325)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Manji.

I think the best thing for us to do is to give five minutes for each question and answer round.

We begin with you, Mr. Sweet.

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much, Irshad, for being here. I really appreciate your taking the time. I hope to get in two questions. I know that your answers are always fulsome, so we'll see what happens. I want to get to the Indonesian situation, but I want to ask you a question that is similar to the one I asked you when you were here.

There are many courageous Muslims like you. Actually, they're probably not just like you, but there are many courageous Muslims who are moderate and defend the Muslim traditions, those positive ones that you were talking about, yet it seems that in the media we only hear the extremist expressions of Islam.

I don't know if you have any magic answers on how to correct the way the media reports, but how can we as political leaders support those moderate voices so they are more clearly echoed, and so we don't have a Canadian community that begins to see Islam, or Muslims, I should say, all as radicals, when, really, the moderates have the kinds of values you have...?

Ms. Irshad Manji: Thank you, sir.

I don't think we can correct—if that's the word to use—the approach that mainstream journalists will take, because they themselves are very harried and very hurried these days, and, frankly, journalism becomes lazy under those conditions.

But what I can tell you is that the good news lies in digital media. For example, many people who are seeking to make positive change no longer rely on the journalistic masses to get their messages out: social media does that for them. In fact, when I had to make the several statements that I did in Indonesia, I never submitted a press release. I said what I had to say via Twitter and that was picked up by the media.

The other thing to point out is that encouragement and support of entrepreneurial reform-minded Muslims would be a great help. Let me explain what I mean by “entrepreneurial”. For example, you talk about Muslims with my values, and I'll quickly enunciate what those values are. We can get them on the record: individual liberty; freedom of thought; universal human rights, meaning not cultural relativism, but that every human being, regardless of what religion or culture he or she comes from, is entitled to a basic set of human rights, such as freedom from violence, for example, and freedom of thought; and finally, pluralism of peaceful ideas. Peaceful ideas.... Jihadism, I don't tolerate.

So with those values, my team and I at the Moral Courage Project are actually creating a web-based TV channel, in partnership with Google, to spread the message of moral courage by telling the stories in two-minute video segments—no more than two minutes—of individuals around the world, including Indonesia, who are exhibiting moral courage, the point being that if people around the world can see that somebody who sounds like them, looks like them, and lives in that part of the world is able to make change, they'll ask: “Why can't I? Why shouldn't I try?” That really is the multimedia approach that I think will effectively bypass those journalists who simply do not have the capacity and sometimes the interest to pay attention to different angles of the story.

The final thing I will say in response to this question—a fulsome answer, as you predicted—is that it's also important, as we are striving to be sensitive, as we are striving not to reinforce negative stereotypes of Muslims, to remember that positive stereotypes can be equally dangerous. By that, I mean what I hear so often in this country: “You know, Muslims are a peace-loving people.”

Well, for the most part we are law-abiding, but where are the moderates who are willing to stand up to their own imams to say that anti-Semitism can no longer be tolerated in our mosques, or who will ask why, in the 21st century, do we need to be dividing men and women in our mosques when racial segregation, we all know, is wrong? How does gender segregation differ?

Where are both Muslims and non-Muslims who are willing to ask these questions? Too often, we're afraid of being labelled bigots, racists, or Islamophobes for doing so, but I would argue that if we're going to achieve a deeper meaning of respect, then we can't be treating one another as children, as infants who will somehow melt under the spotlight of our questions, but rather, that we respect one another enough to treat each other as peers, as equals who are capable of handling challenging questions. That is what our freedom is all about.

● (1330)

The Chair: Maybe we'll have a chance for you at the end, Mr. Sweet.

Mr. David Sweet: I suspected that. Thank you, Chair. I appreciate it.

The Chair: Mr. Marston, please.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Thank you.

Welcome. I have to plead guilty: I haven't read your book yet, but will get to that in due course.

There are several things.... There's one question I have for you. On your trip to Indonesia, did you have any difficulty getting in and out of the country?

Ms. Irshad Manji: It's a great question: no difficulty getting into the country, some difficulty getting out of the country.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Oh, I thought they might have helped you out of the country.

Ms. Irshad Manji: Well, I'm sure a number of them would have personally assisted my expulsion from the country, but I don't think it was an accident that my Canadian passport suddenly went missing immediately after the melee of the attack.

I do know that the Canadian embassy in Jakarta did what it called its very best to help me get out of the country. They did expedite the process of giving me an emergency passport but frankly, sir, I have to be very truthful with you here. It was only after the news hit the headlines of what had happened, and I know this to be true because after—

Mr. Wayne Marston: I'm going to interrupt you because I'd like to ask some more questions.

Ms. Irshad Manji: Okay, but I just quickly want to say again, though, that I think our own people in the diplomatic corps have to be more alert and more proactive on this front.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Sure.

I was actually leading to a kind of different spot. I'll use that as an opening. Your description of what Islam is and how it should be practised, the openness that is spoken of, you had a name for it. I didn't write it down, but you said it was like jihad—

Ms. Irshad Manji: Well, I spelled it as well, yes.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Anyway, the piece of paper has moved someplace....

The Muslim people I have encountered.... I have a couple of mosques in my riding. I've been there on several occasions. In Mississauga, I even had a meeting between some leadership of the Muslim community and our leader, which I arranged. The people who I have been exposed to over the last seven years have been very much the type of people who you described as being allied to that particular perspective, and the teaching of jihadism is something that I think everybody here would be gravely concerned about.

When you look at the population of Indonesia.... It struck me when you talked about the first case where you were disrupted by about 80 people, and in the second case you mentioned there were 100 people on motorcycles with iron bars. I spent some time in Saudi Arabia and saw some activities—nothing like that—but still, I got a sense of the nature of how they go about their lives relative to their religion.

In our assessment of Indonesia—and you're talking about that change that has happened in five years and how it needs a rapporteur to take a look at—it just seems to me, and I may be way off base here, that the discussion around how serious the implications of that situation are.... We have Human Rights Watch and other people commenting on the situation in a somewhat more positive light than you have here. I don't doubt your testimony at all; in fact, that's why we have you here. I'm a little concerned about the discrepancy and how we would balance that to the point of saying that a special rapporteur is needed.

If you would like to expand on that a little, it might be helpful.

● (1335)

Ms. Irshad Manji: Thank you.

What I can tell you is that, as somebody who follows Human Rights Watch on Twitter and knows a number of the people, particularly in their New York offices, who work on this file, Southeast Asia and Indonesia in particular, my account, frankly, does not diverge from theirs.

Now, I don't know what you all have heard in official testimony, but I can assure you that they understand that what I have experienced is very much the reality of what ordinary people who dare to speak up about human rights—

Mr. Wayne Marston: They talk about lip service being paid to human rights when in fact.... They weren't positive in any way, but they were talking about how they thought it appeared as if the country had made great strides towards stability. You talked about how they are projecting that image to the rest of the world, so I don't think it's necessarily a difference of perspective, but just perhaps how it's expressed. It's just that getting to the point of a special rapporteur is a very, very serious step—

Ms. Irshad Manji: Right.

Mr. Wayne Marston: —and so that's why I wanted to allow you the chance to expand on the need for that.

Ms. Irshad Manji: Right. Thank you for clarifying the intention of the question.

On those human rights activists, from journalists to members of non-governmental organizations to lawyers, the whole coalition that Human Rights Watch represents, when we have engaged, when my team and I have engaged, representatives of that coalition in places like Jakarta, the capital, or Yogyakarta, which is the city in which the worst attack on us happened, to a person—to a person—they all say to us that they find themselves in a catch-22. If you speak up for the freedoms that are guaranteed in the constitution of Indonesia, then you can expect either yourself or your family—and that's a big issue, your family—to be targeted. But—

Mr. Wayne Marston: Could I interrupt you just for one second?

The Chair: You can't, because we're a minute over now.

Ms. Irshad Manji: I'll finish up this answer.

The Chair: Yes, please do.

Ms. Irshad Manji: You'll be targeted the next day. But if you don't speak up, then of course nothing changes. What they're trying to say, and again, as we prodded them further about clarity of their message, each and every one pointed out that the only option they can now foresee to make serious change on the ground in Indonesia is to have diplomats and political leaders who are allied with the Indonesian government, supporting the government, to challenge, to nudge and to prod them to invite the special rapporteur in.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Mr. Chair, could I ask you, then, a question to pass along...?

The Chair: This is a novel procedural twist.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Sure.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Well, it might be a point that you might see as worthwhile and you might not.

The Chair: All right.

Mr. Wayne Marston: It's the differentiation between a totalitarian type of regime keeping power and doing those things that we see in so many other countries, and one that because of being Muslim and their approach to that....

The Chair: Pardon?

Mr. Wayne Marston: The rights that are being lost in this country: is it primarily because of a religion-driven situation or a totalitarian one? That's where I was trying to go.

The Chair: Okay. Well, that is out of order, but I'm sure that nonetheless our witness heard it and may be able to comment on it in the process of answering the next round of questions, which goes to Mr. Sweet, apparently.

● (1340)

Mr. David Sweet: Yes, and that's because of my colleague, Mr. Chair. I appreciate that.

Ms. Manji, there's another question that I wanted to ask. You say that five years ago the Muslim majority was one of the most pluralistic and that now today it has very, very serious issues. Can you tell me—and your opinion is fine—what you think has precipitated such a radical change? You mentioned the Saudi influence. Are there other things? Is that the primary reason?

Ms. Irshad Manji: I mentioned in my testimony that I think three major factors are at play. One is very weak and poor leadership under the current president. Prior to this president, we had a man who was affectionately known as “Gus Dur”, who was a very staunchly reformist Muslim and made statements such as “freedom of expression is necessary if we're going to show humility to God”. You don't get that from too many Muslim leaders, even in this country. The kind of reform, openness, and democracy that a new generation in Indonesia thought would continue after the death of Gus Dur clearly has been pulled back by the weakness of the current president.

That weakness is then manifested in a second way, which is a sort of complicity with security forces for the sake of stability; that is to say, to show international investors that this is a safe place to put their money. I would argue that the humane way of achieving stability is to crack down on the religious totalitarians, not on those who seek to live up to Indonesia's constitution of diversity and secularism.

The third factor is indeed Saudi petrodollars. I'll give you a very quick example of what I mean, quite apart from the observation that I made at the airport in Jakarta. When you look at where in Indonesia sharia law is being introduced.... And I don't just mean the kind of sharia law that we would refer to here in Canada. I mean very, very harsh measures, such as caning of women, such as legislation that permits the stoning of women, and of course the imposition of the hijab and the burka on women. When you look at where in Indonesia sharia law is being introduced, you find that most of those places are places that tourists from the Arabian Peninsula are flocking to and spending their money.

Well, there's something to be said for keeping those coffers full with tourism dollars by ensuring that Indonesians defer to the culture represented by the Arabian Peninsula. Interestingly, it is couched as religious observation or religious observance, but in fact what it is—and I'll use some pretty harsh language here—is cultural imperialism from the Arabian Peninsula to a much more pluralistic non-Arab country, such as Indonesia, and it's done in the guise of tourism.

Mr. David Sweet: Do you have a question, Gary?

Mr. Gary Schellenberger (Perth—Wellington, CPC): Yes. Thank you for that.

Do you have concerns regarding respect for the rights to religious...to freedom of religion and freedom of expression in Indonesia?

Ms. Irshad Manji: Sir, could you restate that question, just so I understand it fully?

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: Okay. Instead of reading it backwards, I'll read it frontwards.

Do you have concerns regarding respect for the rights to freedom of religion and freedom of expression in Indonesia?

Ms. Irshad Manji: I do. That, in fact, is the central issue here. It's that freedom of expression and freedom of belief, as guaranteed by Indonesia's own constitution, are under assault in Indonesia. That's right.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: Are there any religious groups that face particular persecution in Indonesia? If so, could you please explain why?

Ms. Irshad Manji: Yes, there are, at least demonstrably.

One such group is the Ahmadi minority within Islam. Very briefly, I'll say that Ahmadis believe that the Prophet Muhammad was not the final prophet sent by God, that there was still another one, but in most other ways, Ahmadis do identify as Muslim. A war, really, has been waged and continues to be waged against Ahmadis, in killings, targeted killings, in shootings, and other forms of oppression throughout the country.

Then there is the denomination known as Shia Muslims. They, too, in the vast scope of the Muslim world, are a minority. I won't get into the theological differences, but another war is being waged against Shias, so much so, by the way, that just as is happening with Shias in Pakistan, many people have observed that Indonesia has eerily replicated Pakistan in how it is treating its own Shia Muslims.

Finally, of course, there's the wider group that one would call liberals—small-l liberals—independent-minded Muslims who treasure secularism, who treasure the separation of organized politics from organized religion, and who want that back, for exactly this reason: because Indonesia itself, as a state, is premised on what are called the Pancasila principles, the five Pancasila principles, of which diversity is one, and that diversity of thought, of expression, of conscience, ought to be respected, since this is what Indonesia is supposed to be about.

Let me be very clear: nobody is saying that those who are more fundamentalist in their beliefs have to be expunged, not at all. That's also part of diversity. What they're saying is that imposing those beliefs on people who don't want them is a violation of the constitution, and in that, quite simply, they are correct.

● (1345)

The Chair: I'm afraid you're out of time. Thank you.

We'll go now to Professor Cotler, please.

Hon. Irwin Cotler (Mount Royal, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I too would like to welcome our witness today, who I regard, really, as the personification herself of moral courage, exactly the project that she heads at NYU.

You mentioned the three major factors that have changed in let's say the last six years. I think the most important one is probably the first, because it then leads to the others, and that is the weak leadership. Regrettably, we no longer have someone in the person of President Gus Dur.

I think I mentioned to you that when I hosted the Indonesian Minister of Justice here in Canada he made two important statements. The first one was that it is a priority for Indonesia to combat terrorism and extremism in order to demonstrate that Islam and terrorism are incompatible. The second was that it is a priority for Indonesia to promote and protect democracy to show that Islam and democracy are compatible. I regret that nobody here in the media covered that press conference. I did not know then—and it wasn't then relevant—how to tweet, or now. Maybe we could have gotten the message out, as you put it, in social media.

This brings me to the specific question of how we can help to promote and protect human rights in Indonesia, particularly religious belief and freedom of expression. You mentioned putting pressure on the leadership about having a UN rapporteur. Are there any particular initiatives that we as a Parliament or as a committee could take, or that we could recommend to our government to take, that might help further the promotion and protection of human rights in Indonesia? Are there aspects, let's say, of Indonesian politics and culture that we may need to bear in mind while we do this?

Ms. Irshad Manji: Well, I think, Professor, what I've been emphasizing throughout the past number of minutes is that Indonesia's own constitution is to guarantee freedom of thought, freedom of belief, and freedom of expression. None of this—none of these ideas—is a holdover of western colonization. This is what the people themselves are to be governed by. So I think it's very important that whatever gestures or moves Canadian parliamentarians make...and do not be subtle about it. There is no need for subtlety here, because there's no sensitivity on the part of those who share our values: they want this back for their country. But in making those moves and those gestures, I think it's very important to frame them as being values that Indonesians themselves have adopted in their constitution.

I do know that the United Nations, every four years, does a review of the human rights records of certain countries. This past year, we saw it do exactly that for Indonesia. I'm sorry to say that there wasn't enough voice from, frankly, our own diplomatic corps in Indonesia.

And let me just make this point, because I think this is very, very important. When I was about to finish up the story of what happened to me vis-à-vis my passport, what I wanted to tell you was that our own embassy staff had received three phone calls from me and my team prior to the attack to say, "We're hearing that there will be security concerns, and we want you to know about these, and please give us an emergency number to call if something untoward should happen." We didn't receive a single call back. Frankly, it was only after the attack happened and this made news that suddenly we heard from our embassy people. The same was not true of the colleague with whom I was travelling, who is a citizen of a different country and who made those calls to her own embassy and received responses.

To me, it's very disappointing that in a country as strategically important, and as vastly populated as this one, our own staff, frankly, approach these issues in what I would suggest to you is a much more politically correct way than they ought to. What is it that we Canadians stand for? Do we know anymore? Do we? Maybe we ought to figure that out, and then, maybe, as people who are paid by the taxpayers of Canada, we ought to represent those values proactively in other parts of the world.

● (1350)

Hon. Irwin Cotler: As you say, we're talking here about universal human rights and values, not things that are being imposed as western constructs, but that are in fact an Indonesian construct that it shares with the universality of human rights. We ought to call them on that and make our views much more open, public, and accountable in that regard.

Ms. Irshad Manji: And thereby give hope to those very people in Indonesia who we love to tell other people in the world that we ally with because of our internationalist ideals: we don't need to be hypocrites on this one.

The Chair: That unfortunately is the end of that round.

We now go to Ms. Grewal.

Mrs. Nina Grewal (Fleetwood—Port Kells, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you for being here, Ms. Manji. It is an honour to have someone as active and involved in religious freedom as you are appear before our committee.

My question is this. On the one hand, Indonesia has a very vibrant and independent media, and on the other hand, observers say that the Government of Indonesia has occasionally restricted media rights, criminalizing individuals who raise controversial political issues or who denounce the practices of powerful businessmen or politicians. Furthermore, some fear that the new law on state intelligence could potentially be used to arrest or prosecute journalists, political opposition members, or human rights activists who denounce government abuses.

Can you comment on the role of the media and the concerns regarding those who speak against the government?

Ms. Irshad Manji: To be clear, you mean the role of journalists within Indonesia...?

● (1355)

Mrs. Nina Grewal: Yes, absolutely.

Ms. Irshad Manji: There is no doubt that among the targeted voices in that country are journalists, as they are, frankly, in most states that have a morally weak, power-hungry government.

I will tell you this. When I spoke to the Alliance of Independent Journalists in Indonesia, I asked, “What does “independent” mean in this context?” The answer I received, to pretty much a consensus, was “not corrupt”, the point being that there are many individuals, enough to create an alliance of independent journalists, who are willing to raise their heads above the parapet.

But I will also let you know that even at this meeting with the Alliance of Independent Journalists we needed to have security—all of us—and it was one of the other moderate religious organizations in Indonesia that provided its own paramilitary, believe it or not, its own militia, to surround the building in which we were meeting to make sure that religious extremists could not do to us what was done at previous events.

The point being, once again, that there are coalitions made in Indonesia today that are large and, frankly, that are beyond numbers that we can conceive of here in Canada, so it's not as if voices like mine are rare. What is rare is that voices like this would (a) be heard and (b) would be stated confidently, without fear of reprisal for their own families the very next day.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: Well, in May 2012, Indonesia underwent its second Universal Periodic Review by the United Nations Human Rights Council. At the time, Canada made a recommendation that Indonesia take measures to guarantee accountability. This was to ensure that human rights violations would be investigated and that those deemed responsible would be prosecuted in a fair, prompt, and impartial manner. Indonesia recently accepted this recommendation.

To your knowledge, is there any kind of evidence of progress in this area? If so, what effective steps have been taken to halt human rights violations? If not, what can Canada do in this context to improve human rights there?

Ms. Irshad Manji: I'm sorry to report that, no, that decision has meant nothing. I'm not trying to be overly simplistic here. The reality is that even after the attack on my team and me, four or five months later no investigation has actually opened up, despite repeated promises by people in power. In fact, demonstrations, public demonstrations in large numbers, have been held to ask the question: where is the promised investigation?

So far, there has been no response to that either, so the question becomes—and you've reflected and reiterated something that Professor Cotler has asked—what specifically can Canada do? It occurs to me that the new Office of Religious Freedom established by this government would be perfectly poised to take up Indonesia as a *cause célèbre*, I would want to say, but I don't mean, of course, in a trivial sense. I mean that if you really want, as Canadian parliamentarians, to sink your teeth into an issue that is tangible, that is focused, that has international repercussions, and that very few others are paying attention to, and thereby make a difference on, I think the Office of Religious Freedom would do well to help human rights activists in Indonesia have their voices heard.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: The Wahid Institute—

The Chair: I'm afraid you're out of time, Mrs. Grewal—my apologies.

We'll go now to our last round.

It is supposed to be Monsieur Jacob's round. He has very generously given some time to Mr. Marston.

● (1400)

Mr. Wayne Marston: He had great sympathy for me, Mr. Chair, as you did in allowing my intervention a few minutes ago.

I really am troubled by what I heard about our embassy staff not delivering the services that, as a Canadian citizen, you deserve. There should be nothing more involved than that statement that you're a Canadian citizen. You should have got the appropriate supports. Hopefully, that's not indicative of anything beyond the mistakes of one individual, but I am concerned. I share some of your concerns.

The other thing I got from your testimony is that Canada did not give a significant intervention in the United Nations Universal Periodic Review of Indonesia, which sounds like something that we should have done. Again, I'd have to see that particular report to get a sense of involvement in it, but I agree that it is a mechanism that's there to draw attention to circumstances like these. In Indonesia, it sounds like getting the story out seems to be one of the serious problems, and that could well be part of the answer.

I'm not so sure I agree with you about the new Office of Religious Freedom in Canada, because, like you, I believe in a secular approach to things, and I'm still wrestling with that particular office until I see more definition of it.

In Aceh province, you have I believe 98% Muslims in that particular part of the country, and they seem to be Muslims attacking Muslims there, if we start looking at the human rights violations. That's part of what prompted me to take that question to you before —via the chair, as I did—about how much of this is power politics instead of religious-based activities. How much of this is about the leadership and the forces that control that country protecting their own interests as opposed to actually being religion driven...?

Ms. Irshad Manji: It's a very good question. Power politics is exactly that—*power* politics—which means that any excuse will be invoked as cover, and in this case, as in so many other cases in the Muslim world, religion is invoked as cover.

But, sir, again, one can't make clean distinctions like this without a little bit more nuance. I was asked earlier who are some of the groups being targeted. I am horrified at myself for having failed to even mention, in my response, Christians, precisely because I wanted to make the point that Muslim-on-Muslim violence is rife.

But Christian churches—there's no question about this—have been targeted by arsonists and by bombers. Christians in the country of Indonesia are no small minority; there's a huge population. In that respect, of course, once again, power is involved: "We, as Muslims, will have power over you". But religion certainly is invoked in more substantive ways in those cases than when the Shia or the Ahmadi are attacked.

Mr. Wayne Marston: With that, you're actually leading to where my next question is—West Papua.

Ms. Irshad Manji: Yes.

Mr. Wayne Marston: That population is overwhelmingly Christian, from what I understand, but the indications I've received as our human rights critic is that this is around the resource base more than religion, and perhaps culture and the nationalistic ideals of that particular population relative to their own country as they'd like to see it. Would that be accurate?

Ms. Irshad Manji: I would suggest that the resource base argument probably is quite accurate. Of course, we know that Papuans have had some nationalist aspirations but—and I give my opinion on this, as I haven't done hard research into this—I do not believe that those aspirations are a threat to the integrity of the Indonesian nation.

Resources, again, are always at the bottom of these—

Mr. Wayne Marston: Very, very quickly, if you can—

The Chair: Monsieur Jacob, is it okay if he continues?

Okay.

● (1405)

Mr. Wayne Marston: Where were the churches burned? Were they in the Muslim portion, or were they in the Christian portion?

Ms. Irshad Manji: They were in both.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to Monsieur Jacob.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Jacob (Brome—Missisquoi, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you for your testimony, Mrs. Manji.

I would like to know since when you are interested in religious freedom, and whether you agree with me that the exercise of this freedom is a very complex issue in Indonesia.

[*English*]

Ms. Irshad Manji: My answer to the second question is that yes, of course it's complex, but it does not need to be overly intellectualized. When it comes to religion and culture, we, in trying to be good global citizens, wind up, I think, in the paralysis of analysis. On this one, I think, action should be pretty easy for us to undertake, precisely because the values for which this country is supposed to stand are themselves not simple. They too are complex, but they ought to be clear.

As for when I became interested in religious freedom, I would suggest that it was as soon as I knew what freedom was. My family and I are political refugees from East Africa. We came from Uganda. I was born there. We were expelled under the dictatorship of General Idi Amin, who himself is a Muslim. We wound up on the precious soil of Canada. I remember, as I was growing up, being thoroughly enthralled by my ability to ask questions at my public school. I remember thinking to myself how unbelievably fortunate I'd been to wind up in a place where, through no taking up of arms, through no letting of blood, we had been given our freedom, my family and I.

Without at all wanting to sound corny about this—this comes from a place of absolute sincerity—I will tell you that every day I wake up thanking God for helping us wind up in an open society and then asking God to help me stay worthy of being a citizen of an open society. That means earning my freedom every day, first and foremost by using it as best I know how, but making sure that I've earned it, rather than taking it for granted.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Jacob: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

We unfortunately don't have any time to pursue further questions.

I have one procedural matter for the committee. We were supposed to have an in camera session on Thursday to discuss a report on the situation of the Copts in Egypt, but there have been a number of changes in Egypt. Anybody who hasn't been living under a rock is aware of this. It makes it difficult for us to prepare a report at this time.

As an alternative, it had been suggested that we could invite John Sifton to speak to this committee. He would be available by video link on Thursday, if it is the will of the committee to accept him as a witness. Would that be acceptable to members?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: All right. That's what we'll do.

In that case, this gives me the opportunity to thank our witness today.

Ms. Manji, we very much appreciate it.

In particular, I wanted to express my appreciation. I've only read one of your books, and I'm very much looking forward to the second one. I want say with regard to it that although I know you address it as an open letter to fellow Muslims, it was very helpful to me, and I suspect that it would be to others because of the fact that I think we suffer from an unusual information vacuum. Although everybody is happy to talk about Islam, I find that there's a combination of sort of meaningless political correctness and a nudge, nudge, wink, wink stereotype. We all say that Islam is part of the family of the Abrahamic religions and is civilized and so on, but the nudge, nudge, wink, wink is that it's the problem child.

I find that our media does that a lot. They actively search out—it's not as if you catch them or can see it—the craziest-looking people to put forward as if they're representative. I think it goes without saying that it's actually hard to put together that many crazy people in the world, but the media likes to portray that. So I appreciate the way in which you explain things to those of us who are not perhaps the primary intended audience. It was very helpful. Your testimony here today was similarly helpful, so thank you.

● (1410)

Ms. Irshad Manji: Thank you for caring. I appreciate that very much.

[*Applause*]

The Chair: We are adjourned.

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