

*Making a Change in Two Different Countries: the United States and Turkmenistan*

Have you ever tried to change something in your country? Here in America it seems pretty easy, but in other parts of the world it is very difficult. Here is a story of two people who tried to do the same thing in their community but in different places. One of them was in the United States and the other was in Turkmenistan.

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Dear Maksat,

I was driving home after my first semester of college. The roads had a lot of potholes in them. I called my local city council member about it, and he said the city was already planning to fix them. I hope that the construction workers fix the potholes soon. If they don't, I'm afraid I'm going to pop my tires like my friend did the other day.

Do you have any problems on your roads?

Sincerely,

Braden

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Dear Braden,

In the city where I live, there are a lot of potholes, but not as many as in the rural areas.

In my city, however, we don't even have a city council to report problems to. We just have a mayor who is appointed by the president. If someone is related to or is a really good friend with the mayor, they have a better chance of the government addressing their concern, but they are not guaranteed to have someone listen to their request.

If someone makes a complaint, they can be intimidated, tortured, have property taken away from them and even go to jail! In fact I had a complaint about police officers not enforcing laws on the roads since people are always swerving back and forth

between lanes and driving on the wrong side of the road. I was arrested, was beaten, had my car taken away from me and was put in jail for one year. I can't say anything negative because the government has access to my emails and letters. Thankfully, I am sending this from an encrypted server.

Have your roads been fixed yet? Have a good break from college!

Best wishes,  
Maksat

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\*\*\* Six months later \*\*\*

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Dear Maksat,

Sorry for not responding for so long. I had a very busy semester at college. The potholes are fixed, but the roads still have some problems with them. There are some dips that make driving very bumpy!

I am going to ask some of my neighbors to sign a petition to get the government to make the roads better. I also will go to my city council meeting and tell them that the roads are not totally fixed yet. Then I will gather people to hold up signs that say "Fix the roads!" on them. I hope my city council will vote to continue fixing the roads.

Are you allowed to peacefully assemble in your country? I hope you didn't get arrested because of the email you sent to me.

Sincerely,  
Braden

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Dear Braden,

We are allowed to peacefully assemble if we have the government's approval first. But the government has never given permission for anyone to peacefully assemble yet.

Oh, I didn't get arrested from the last email I sent you. There isn't anything I can do to get the potholes fixed. I want to go where you are. It seems ...

[knock, knock]

I think that might be the overseers of the government's cotton fields. I missed yesterday's mandatory cotton picking so I will lose my job if I am late today. Sorry I was cut off so short. See you later.

Have a good day!

Sincerely,  
Maksat

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Dear Maksat,

*When I went to the city council meeting, the council members seemed interested in fixing the roads. Enough people signed the petition for the city council to get construction workers to fix the dips in the roads, and a lot of people saw us with the signs and supported the idea of fixing the roads.*

*I am sorry you cannot do anything about your roads. Maybe you can visit me someday.*

Sincerely,  
Braden

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*Braden and Maksat were friends for the rest of their lives. Eventually when he turned 40, Maksat was given permission by migration officials to leave Turkmenistan to spend a year with Braden.*

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