

To whom it may concern:

I moved to Maryland from out of state and have lived here since my youth. I think Maryland is a truly wonderful place to live. Everyone is welcoming and open. However, this bill is the complete opposite of that spirit of Maryland. It is an overly harsh bill that attempts to stifle people's right to speak. One of the reasons the United States is a proud nation in the world is because of the First Amendment. The First Amendment reflects the fundamental principles of our founding. It protects our freedom to express our beliefs, to think independently without government's oppression. These freedoms are at the heart of a free society. The government should not grant nonprofit status in a way that restricts the status of nonprofit organizations or pressures them to control the ideas they express. I oppose this bill because it attempts to do just that. The Maryland state government is attempting to silence our God-given freedom of political and religious speech by allowing churches, and religious schools to fine anyone who speaks about candidates and elections, and even to strip them of their state income, sales, and property tax exemptions. This bill would breach our constitutionally protected right to religious and political expression.

Furthermore, this bill would force charities and religious organizations to pledge, as a condition of maintaining their operating and tax exemption, that they "do not and will not" engage in candidate-related speech. This is an unconstitutional requirement. The government is essentially saying, "Give up your First Amendment rights or lose your legal status and tax protections." The fundamental freedoms of freedom of thought, expression, and association protect the right of churches and ministries to speak about public life and those who govern. This bill, therefore, seeks to suppress that freedom is absurd. We are a nation of the free. However, proposing a law that would suppress freedom of speech, something only found in other dictatorships, undermines the very identity of this country. Even now, victims in Hong Kong, China, and North Korea are being persecuted and imprisoned simply for speaking out against leaders or candidates with opposing political views. This is because those are communist countries with brutal dictatorships. My grandfather, hating that dictatorship and the Communist Party, fled North Korea during the Korean War and sought freedom in South Korea. I know firsthand the horrors of places where freedom of speech is denied. Surely Maryland isn't trying to emulate those dictatorships? Absolutely not. Maryland is a beautiful place. And for it to remain beautiful, it must uphold the fundamental human rights guaranteed by the First Amendment. So I oppose this bill.

Thank you for hearing me out.