

Assistant Secretary Michael H. Posner  
Remarks at Ahfad Women's University  
"Civil Society and U.S. Foreign Policy"  
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{Thanks and acknowledgments.}

First, I want to wish all of you a happy and blessed Ramadan. At this time of self-reflection and renewal, I am especially pleased to be invited here. I wanted to come to Ahfad Women's university today to speak to you but also to listen and to engage with you in dialogue. I believe that Sudanese youth, and particularly Sudanese women, can and must play a leading role in building peace, stability, and broad-based economic growth in your country. I hope that some of you will do this within your government, but that all of you will do it as members of civil society.

- The United States government and particularly my boss, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton -- has been emphasizing the importance of civil society in crafting strong constitutions, building stable societies and developing sustainable democracies.

-- in our country, and in a growing number of countries around the world, it is no longer unusual for young people to work in non-governmental organizations -- NGOs -- and then go into government. And after serving in government, many go back to become active in civil society.

- As you may know, Secretary Clinton began her career in an NGO. She was a lawyer for the Children's Defense Fund. And President Obama started his political career as a community organizer in my hometown of Chicago. In these roles both of them represented vulnerable populations, and both urged the U.S. Government to serve its citizens better.

- Now, that's not to say that in a democracy, governments and NGOs always see eye-to-eye. They don't -- and they shouldn't. But there is a common recognition that it takes the work of many different kinds of citizens' groups to improve democracy and governance. They do it by informing governments about issues that may or may not have hit the radar and become known to busy officials. They do it by advocating for vulnerable people whose needs are not being met through existing government policies or programs. They do it by pushing government to do

better, and to work more efficiently and to spend its time and resources on the issues that matter most to the people. And they do it by holding those of us in government accountable for our actions.

-These functions are vital. I say this from a personal experience. I began my career as a lawyer and then did human rights work at NGOs for more than 30 years before joining the government. Over those three decades, I have been able to see with my own eyes how the interplay between civil society and government has helped countries emerge from conflict and corruption and become stronger.

Let me give you a couple of examples:

-- When I first started working in sub-Saharan Africa in the mid-1970s, there were virtually no Human Rights NGOs in this region except for in South Africa and Zimbabwe, which was then called Rhodesia. Now there are civil society groups working on human rights and many other issues in every part of this continent. They are trying to turn weak democracies into truly representative and strong ones and make strong democracies grow more transparent and responsive. But unfortunately in too many countries there are still burdens and restrictions on civil society organizations. The new constitution that was adopted in Kenya last year was the result of a decade-long struggle by civil society and government to create a constitution based on the rule of law and respect for human rights. And William Matunga, the former head of the Human Rights Commission, a leading NGO, who is a good friend of mine, and one of the actors –the primary actors in that struggle– has just in the last few weeks become the new chief justice of Kenya.

-- As an American, I find many parallels with civil society in my own country's history. Of course the Kenyan constitution is an entirely a Kenyan document, which is why people there have placed their hopes in it. But the open, consultative nature of the constitutional process was much in the same in spirit as ours. By the way, the framers of the U.S. Constitution were at it for a decade. There were sharp regional divisions and different political histories and a wide range of different opinions among the original 13 states. And if you think that process was easy, I encourage you to read their papers. Their debates over such questions as how to enforce the rule of law, how to put checks and balances on power, how much secrecy a government should be allowed and how much transparency should be required are still being reread and re-argued today. That Constitution was in the broadest sense the product of civil society at its best. Of course it was flawed - it allowed slavery and failed to give women voting rights. Though we amended the constitution to abolish slavery in the 1860s and then to give women the right to

vote 60 years later, today we are still constantly working to build a more perfect union.

-- I had the privilege of seeing civil society transform other countries in my own lifetime. I spent time in the Philippines in the 1980's, a country that grappled with serious problems of corruption, flawed elections, and lack of rule of law. I was involved with several legal and human rights organizations that became part of a broader effort to have an open, electoral system. That resulted in the 1986 election of Corazon Aquino, the first woman leader and freely elected president of the Philippines. Civil society organizations pushed government to create an independent electoral commission that presided over that historic election.

-- Likewise in Indonesia, hundreds of civil society groups today are working on promoting democracy, human rights, religious tolerance and a range of other issues. Their efforts have been central to transforming that country that has a history of ethnic conflicts into a vibrant young democracy. Today, it's a pluralistic system and one that respects religious and ethnic diversity. Indonesia's political stability has created an environment that has attracted domestic and foreign investment. The economy has boomed. And this month Secretary Clinton flew to Bali where she took part in a Strategic Dialogue which included Government and Civil Society.

-- This dialogue is part of a broader U.S. diplomatic effort to reach beyond government-to-government relationships and engage directly with people of other countries. We seek to find ways to cooperate on issues of mutual interest, whether it's human rights or environmental issues, improving education and employment opportunities for women and girls, or cooperating on global health issues. Secretary Clinton has made engagement with civil society a major theme that she outlined in a dramatic speech in Krakow, Poland last summer. Finally, I would like to say a word about the critical role we have seen women play in building peace and security around the world. Women suffer disproportionately in wartime. They continue to be grossly under-represented in peace negotiations. Yet, women have played a critical role in resolving conflict from Northern Ireland to Sri Lanka., especially by insisting that peace settlements address the chronic unresolved issues that tend to make conflicts simmer and then re-ignite again in a few years. It is also worth studying the example set by two women who have helped countries wracked by violence build peace from the ground up, President Rosa Otunbayeva of Kyrgystan and President Ellen Johnson of Liberia. As you may know President Otunbayeva set an interesting precedent for her young democracy by taking office and then declining to run for re-election in order to create a tradition of peaceful

and prompt transfer of power. But I will leave you with a quote from President Johnson Surleaf of Liberia who is a woman I greatly admire . She said “If your dreams do not scare you, they are not big enough.” I hope you will dream big dreams and then get involved. Democracy is not a spectator sport, and young people around this inter-connected world understand this intuitively. Most of those I meet are eager to get involved in shaping their societies, making them more inclusive, making more respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms a part of their existence, and doing so making them stronger. The United States will support those efforts. I want to thank you and again I am happy to answer your questions.

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