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Remarks

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Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs William Burns,
Egyptian Activist Sherif Mansour, USAID Administrator Rajiv Shah and
Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission Chair Sima Samar
At the Launch of Strategic Dialogue with Civil Society

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Ben Franklin Room

Washington, D.C.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Good morning, everyone. I'm very pleased to welcome you to the Department of State and to the launch of this first-ever Strategic Dialogue with Civil Society. Today's event is the logical outgrowth of Secretary Clinton's more than two years of intensive consultations and interaction with civil society representatives across the globe.

We are honored to have citizen activists with us today from virtually every continent. Some of you are here as alumni of the Department's Leadership Visitor Programs and have been asked to participate in recognition of your pioneering work at home, from launching alternative energy education programs to advocating on behalf of individuals with disabilities, to encouraging civic participation through a grassroots democracy movement. We deeply admire your passion and commitment to improving your communities.

In recent weeks, we have been awed by the power of committed citizens to effect change in their societies. We've borne witness to a remarkable triumph of human spirit and human courage in Cairo and in Tunis. As

President Obama said of events in Egypt, we saw a new generation emerge, a generation that uses its own creativity and talent and technology to call for a government that is responsive to its boundless aspirations.

History too reflects the moral force of individuals committed to securing rights and advancing opportunities for all citizens, from the group of bereaved mothers in Argentina who organized to protest the disappearances of their missing sons and daughters, to the millions of people who came together across the world to battle apartheid. Not every nation has a large-scale civil society movement. Sometimes it's a lone voice who seizes the imagination or who pricks the conscience of a society, a journalist who continues to report in the face of threats and intimidation, an attorney who takes unpopular cases at considerable risk, or a blogger who engages in critical debate despite threats and persecution.

As President Obama has stressed, international relations are not just about ties between governments. They're increasingly about the links between societies. The problems that all of us face today are too complex for governments alone to solve. As community activists in their own right, both President Obama and Secretary Clinton know this to be true and share a passionate conviction in the power of civil society to bend the arc of history. Secretary Clinton has championed human rights, democracy, and civil society for many years. Her longstanding efforts to advance women's rights predate her famous 1995 speech in Beijing, and her establishment with former Secretary Albright of the Vital Voices Democracy Initiative, which today continues to train and organize women leaders across the globe.

As the Secretary said in Krakow, societies move forward when citizens are empowered to transform common interests into common actions that serve the common good. Each of you is an essential part of that great effort, and each of you can count on our enduring admiration and support. And so it's in that spirit that I'm proud and honored to introduce to you the Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

SECRETARY CLINTON: Thank you so much, Bill. (Applause.) Thank you very much, Under Secretary Burns, and let me welcome all of you to the Ben

Franklin Room here at the State Department for this inaugural session of the Strategic Dialogue with Civil Society. I am delighted to have this opportunity to meet you and to welcome you to this effort, and I also want to welcome Foreign Minister Azubalis from Lithuania, which is now holding the presidency of the Community of Democracies. Foreign Minister, thank you for joining us for this Civil Society meeting.

We have a broad cross-section of global civil society here today, and we have thousands of others who are participating via interactive videoconferences at 50 of our embassies around the world. Even more are taking part in live online chats in Arabic, Russian, and Spanish. I want to start by acknowledging the many brave people who could not be with us today because they are doing what civil society does. They are fighting for human rights and dignity. In the last weeks, we have seen their courage on display in the streets of Tunis and the town squares of Cairo. We have watched with great anticipation as they have stood up for their rights and aspirations.

For decades, Egyptian activists worked under a repressive system of official controls, including laws that required them to register before they could start work, the kinds of measures that impede the work of many of you here today and many more who are joining us by conference. But you are here because you have not been deterred. You have gone on with your work despite harassment and persecution. And we have seen the progress that can be made because of your commitment.

The events of the past few weeks, which we never could have predicted when we began to plan for this months ago, makes our meeting even more timely and the issues more urgent. If we're going to take advantage of this historic moment, we have to tap the expertise, experience, and energy of civil society. Across the Middle East today, we see people calling on governments to be more open, more accountable, more responsive. They want a stronger voice in their own affairs. They want to be treated fairly and with dignity. As I've said before, it is in the interests of governments to answer these demands, to reflect the will of their own people. Countries with vibrant and representative institutions settle differences not in the streets, but in city halls and parliament buildings. That, in turn, makes them

more stable, and they tap the potential of all of their people, which gives them the base for greater prosperity and progress.

The United States supports democratic change. It is in line with our values and our interests. We support citizens working to make their governments more open, transparent, and accountable. We uphold the universal rights of every person to live freely, to have your voice heard, and your vote count. And we want to work with all partners, governments, the private sector, civil society, the entire cross-section that gives us the chance to make real and lasting change.

Now, of course, we recognize there are many paths to democracy, and we recognize that true and sustainable democracy is about far more than elections. Each society will work to realize its own democratic values and build its own democratic institutions in its own way, because we also recognize the uniqueness of culture and history and experience. But let me be clear, our support for democracy and human rights is not about siding for or against either governments or citizens. This is about standing up for universal principles and for those in and out of government who support them. So as our partners take steps to open their own political and economic systems, we will support those efforts. And we will urge others to follow that path. Governments that pursue democratic change, economic openness, will have a friend in the United States.

We're also continuing to work with civil society and those who are outside of government to lay a groundwork for reform because, as I said earlier this month in Munich, the transition to democracy is more likely to be peaceful and permanent when it involves both the government in power and a broad cross-section of the governed. Civil society holds governments accountable, keeps them honest, and helps them be more effective. But you play an even more fundamental role than that. You help to strengthen the basic bonds of trust that are essential to democracy.

We had a wonderful phrase that came to us from the French observer Alexis de Tocqueville, who talked about the habits of the heart. Because we understand that building trust is the glue that holds democratic societies

together, and trust is often in very short supply. Working with others toward a common purpose, contributing to the life of your community, that's how we practice those habits through civil society.

I've talked often about the three-legged stool that upholds stable societies – a responsive, accountable government; an energetic, effective private sector economy; and then civil society, which represents everything else that happens in the space between the government and the economy, that holds the values, that represents the aspirations. If one of those legs on the stool is too short or too tall, the stool is not stable. And we've seen a lot of unstable stools that now no longer can hold the weight of their societies. And what we hope to do is to bring that into balance with you.

Now, what consists of the individual actions of civil society joining religious organizations of your choice to pursue your spiritual fellowship, donating to humanitarian causes, working to improve your school or clean your street or provide other kinds of citizen activism may not be life-altering events, they may not change the world, but they serve a very important purpose. They ground people in the life of a community. They build that trust with neighbors and they remind us all that we have a stake in the future, that we can work with our fellow citizens in pursuit of a common good even when we disagree. Those are the building blocks of a healthy democracy.

Both President Obama and I have deep personal connections to civil society. He began his career as a community organizer; I began mine as an advocate for women and children's rights. Both of us are committed to defending civil society. In Krakow last July, I spoke about how, in many countries, governments are trying to crush civic activism. Well, we will continue to stand up for you. And we are backing that commitment with action. I'm very pleased to announce we are more than doubling our financial support for efforts to respond to threats to civil society, to help human rights workers who have been arrested, activists who've been intimidated, journalists who have been censored. We have launched an international fund that will provide quick assistance, such as communications gear and legal support to NGOs affected by government crackdowns.

We also recognize that new technology opens up new ways for governments to restrict civil society. And yesterday, I spoke at George Washington University about our commitment to Internet Freedom and outlined steps we are taking to protect and advance it.

We're also using diplomatic channels. Last October, I asked every U.S. ambassador and embassy to engage with civil society as a cornerstone of our diplomacy. I've also asked every assistant secretary who travels overseas to meet with civil society groups in addition to governments. I've had that opportunity in my travels as Secretary. Students and professors at a women's college in Saudi Arabia, survivors of human trafficking in Cambodia, business leaders in Brazil. It's one of the best parts of my job. And I also raise these issues with government leaders. I recently wrote the foreign minister of Cambodia about proposed legislation that would impose burdensome reporting requirements on NGOs and prevent many small organizations from operating at all. They've now begun a dialogue with civil society about this law, and we are following that debate closely.

Finally today, we are launching this new Strategic Dialogue. This is the first time we've held a strategic dialogue with any group other than a government, but we know very well the benefits that such dialogues offer. They help break down barriers across governments by creating a forum for regular contact between senior people on both sides. They build habits of cooperation, which increases understanding and helps translate that understanding into practical results. They make it easier for us to identify common problems, set common goals, and share what we are learning.

In our ongoing dialogue with countries, we make progress in areas like nonproliferation, climate change, health and development, agriculture, and other critical issues. We're rolling up our sleeves and getting to work, and that's exactly what we want to do with each of you because our work together on women's rights, corruption, religious freedom, and other issues is just as important as anything we do with governments.

Now, many of our current dialogues involve civil society, and that will continue. But we need to elevate our engagement beyond the discussions

we're already having. We have a lot of ideas about what we might accomplish together, and we have many of our senior diplomats here who will be working on specific issues. Under Secretary Bob Hormats will lead a working group on governance and accountability. Assistant Secretary Mike Posner will focus on democracy and human rights. And Ambassador Melanne Verwee will lead a group focused on empowering women. Now, this is our initial plan, but we want to hear from you about what we need to do to be responsive to what you are facing and how we can build this project together over the next months.

None of us can ever predict what will spark the kind of movements we've seen or even from the past, the firing of a Polish shipyard worker who inspired a democratic movement that changed the face of Europe. But we know that the power of human dignity is always underestimated until the day it finally prevails. So come with us on this journey, because that's what democracy is. It is a road traveled rather than a destination. We know where that journey begins, with the people here in this room and the men and women of civil society everywhere.

So thank you for your courage and your commitment, and please join us in this discussion that we will begin right now. (Applause.) (Inaudible) many distinguished representatives here from our government and also from civil society. I want to begin, though, as I think it would be only appropriate to do so, with Sherif Mansour, a prominent Egyptian activist. And I think it's particularly timely that he would be the person who would kick off this discussion about civil society.

Sharif.

MR. MANSOUR: Thank you. Thank you very much, Mrs. Secretary and thank you for the invite and for your kind words today. I was very much expecting that all these nice words would come, and I think, as you recognized, this is a change that can – only attributed to people in Egypt and Tunisia who proved that ultimately, civil society is a change-maker and the permanent partners for the U.S. in the long run. I think – I was very happy to listen – like to hear

from you that U.S. foreign policy did not – do not have to choose between oppressive governments and the aspiration of the people.

And I think in order for this dialogue, which we're starting today, to be effective, I think we should look back, recognize the mistakes of the past. And let's be honest. The record of the U.S. foreign policy on Egypt and on Tunisia is not very good. I think what we've seen over the last 30 years is that the U.S. have had very biased relationship with complete support for the governments of those countries without enough leverage for civil society.

And I can mention a few facts for the audience. One of them is specifically the support, the – like the U.S. aid support package we've seen in Egypt civil society over the last 30 years, the amount of civil society fund did not exceed 1 percent. And specifically over the last three years, where there was a lot of dissent and people were advocating for reform, and they were preparing for election, the State Department actually conceded to pressure from the Egyptian Government to cut down funds for democracy and to make it only available for government-approved NGOs. I think from now on we need to hear it clearly from State Department that should never happen again. Government recipients of foreign aid should not control U.S. aid money and should not decide what the civil society should do or are able to do.

I think also – like, I'm reminded – was a conversation that when I first hear the word "civil society" which in Arabic means (in Arabic), I heard it for the first time from my previous boss, who is a democracy activist, Dr. Saad Eddin Ibrahim. And when he first said the word in front of President Mubarak – and let me say that clearly, former President Mubarak – President Mubarak interrupted him and said, "So what's wrong with military society?" And I think that shows that this is how these people think. And of course, Dr. Saad Eddin Ibrahim went to explain that they are not mutually exclusive, and that civil society is the best guarantee for stability of the country.

But I'm reminded now that this is a conversation that I am actually having to do right now, is that Egypt have a military government and have civil society who is advocating for reform. And I think from now on, the U.S. foreign

policy should be clear about their support not just morally, financially as well. I am hoping to see a formalized instruction from the U.S. to its diplomat across the world to say that civil society is not just an afterthought. Civil society are equally important in terms of building partnership and future of the countries that you work with.

I hope you take my remarks in good sense. I know that I'm being critical. And I think it's important if we want to move forward to look back, recognize our mistakes and ensure they never happen again. Thank you so much.

SECRETARY CLINTON: Well, Sharif, thank you very much, and I appreciate your remarks and the very clear commitment that you have to civil society and to a path forward in Egypt that will realize a best outcome for the people of Egypt.

And we have given exactly what you asked for, the direction to all of our ambassadors to do what you have said last October, when I gave the instructions to all of our ambassadors that they must engage with civil society. And it sometimes quite hard to do that, you understand. And we will have to keep working for ways to be more effective in how we approach civil society, depending upon the country and the conditions that we find. But the general policy is exactly as you have offered. It must be that we engage with civil society as well as governments, and where we can, try to bring the two together, because together, they make up for a much stronger, more stable future for people. And that's really what we should be seeking. So thank you very much.

MR. MANSOUR: Thank you.

Let me turn now to USAID Administrator Dr. Raj Shah.

ADMINISTRATOR SHAH: Thank you, Secretary Clinton, and thank you, Sharif, for your candid remarks. USAID firmly believes in the Secretary's goal to elevate the quality and depth of our partnerships with civil society. Our Administration, under President Obama and Secretary Clinton's leadership, has pledged to pursue a new approach to development through a

comprehensive new development policy that prioritizes democratic governance and that is defined fundamentally by partnership, innovation, and, in everything we do, seeking real, genuine, lasting results.

At USAID, we seek to create the conditions so that ultimately our assistance is no longer needed, and we know that the only real replacements for the type of work that we support are vibrant civil societies, effective private sectors, and accountable governments that provide effective services broadly to all parts of their populations.

In pursuing this new approach, we will seek to elevate our crucial partnership with civil society. We recognize that civil society organizations create the basics for accountability and have tremendous relevance and significance in all aspects of our work, of course, in the democracy and governance portfolios that will perhaps be the largest part of today's conversation, but also in our efforts to create inclusive economic growth, to fight disease and hunger through agriculture and global health initiatives, and to create more educational opportunities more broadly for all members of society. That's why we are now at a point where nearly 40 percent of our funding goes to nongovernment organizations. And in each of our countries, through all of our missions, we're setting specific targets so that we can increase the percentage of support that we provide to local organizations and local entrepreneurs and local NGOs.

We also recognize that civil society creates transparency and encourages accountable governance more broadly, from reporting on financial practices, identifying and highlighting individual cases of corruption, and reporting on human rights. Using new technologies and supporting innovative new efforts to enable those activities to be more effective is a big focus for us, and we've launched a development innovation venture fund to support the creativity that technology now enables in our collective work.

The Secretary also mentioned our effort to double the size of the global Legal Enabling Environment Program so that local NGOs have technical support when governments do create less space for effective operations.

And finally, of course, we recognize civil society's crucial role in transitions to democracy as we've all been reminded of and inspired by over the last few weeks.

I just would like to close, Madam Secretary, with a brief comment about a package of reforms that we've launched through the QDDR and under your leadership, the USAID Forward reforms. As part of that, we're actually fixing our procurement systems, and I know that's not always a high-visibility topic. But we've taken a number of steps over the course of the last year and under the Secretary's leadership to just make it easier and more transparent for smaller local organizations to work directly with our missions in the 82 countries where we are operating. And some of these are quite arcane, but at the end of the day, I think they will make a big, big difference in providing flexible resources – smaller money, faster moving money – to the kinds of innovative entrepreneurial NGOs that clearly make up the most vibrant sectors of change in all forms of society, and certainly in civil societies.

So we are pursuing that effort, and we welcome your continued candid feedback and also your guidance on how to put that in place in a way that's most effective. And I'll take this opportunity to thank some of the partners here around this table that have been actively informing that effort. So thank you.

SECRETARY CLINTON: Thank you very much, Raj. And let me turn, now, to Dr. Sima Samar, director of the Afghan Independent Commission on Human Rights, for her opening remarks.

MS. SAMAR: Thank you very much. I'm happy to be a part of this event, and I hope that this strategic dialogue on civil society will continue, and it should not be one event.

I'm coming from a country where we are in wars since 30 years. Although, the civil society is very young and still there's civil society and NGO was able to play a vital role to the people of Afghanistan who were able to survive the 30 years of violent war in the country. I think it's very, very clear that we cannot have a – cannot push for good governance and accountability and

transparency for the governments and fight against corruption without having a strong civil society in the country. In this century, I think Afghanistan is the most difficult and problematic country for all of us, and especially for the people in Afghanistan who are suffering everyday from the violence of the terrorist group.

So my recommendation would be in order to continue and support civil society for good governance in Afghanistan would be: One, more stronger support for human rights defenders and civil society in the country not only politically, but also financial support to the civil society.

Two, more support on capacity building of the civil society group, men and women, in Afghanistan in order to be able to keep the government in Afghanistan responsive and accountable and try to bring to justice the perpetrator of human rights and stop the culture of impunity in Afghanistan.

Three, I think more focus should be put on the education in order to build the capacity of civil society. If you don't have a proper and good quality of education for young men and women in Afghanistan, we cannot really have a strong civil society. So that would be one of the issues that I recommend to do within Afghanistan.

Four, I think please do not use the excuse of respecting culture and religion in Afghanistan not to touch on human rights, and specifically on women's rights. I mean, we should not use that excuse not to touch the issues or the values of human rights in Afghanistan. It is of universal value, and it's the value of human being not (inaudible) value.

And finally, I would like to say that acknowledging women's role and women's participation and women's existence in a society like Afghanistan, I don't think a – civil society without full participation of women will be effective on keeping the governments accountable. And I say that acknowledging the existence of women and then, of course, include the women on the decision-making policies and then support them. It's not only – I mean, unfortunately in our country mostly women are not

acknowledged; their existence is very, very symbolic, although we all put a lot of pressure in the government.

And finally, I would say that please do not have only contact with the governments. As Sharif said – I completely agree – unfortunately the U.S. has been supporting very, let's say, undemocratic leaders in the Muslim countries, so that will affect Afghanistan. If we like it or not, that is the reality. And please do continue to be supportive and have contact with the civil society, men and women in the country, and thank you very much.

SECRETARY CLINTON: Thank you very much, Sima. The press is going to leave at this point so that we can begin our discussion.