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Remarks at the American University in Cairo

Secretary Condoleezza Rice

Cairo, Egypt
June 20, 2005



Thank you very much, Dr. Hala Mustafa, for that really kind and warm introduction and your inspiring thoughts about democracy here in the region. I am honored to be here in the great and ancient city of Cairo.

The United States values our strategic relationship and our strengthening economic ties with Egypt. And American presidents since Ronald Reagan have benefited from the wisdom and the counsel of President Mubarak, with whom I had the pleasure of meeting earlier today.

The people of America and Egypt have always desired to visit one another and to learn from one another. And the highest ideals of our partnership are embodied right here, in the American University of Cairo. This great center of learning has endured and thrived -- from the days when our friendship was somewhat rocky, to today, when the relationship is strong. And I am very grateful and honored to address you in the halls of this great center of learning.

Throughout its history, Egypt has always led this region through its moments of greatest decision. In the early 19th century, it was the reform-minded dynasty of Muhammad Ali that distinguished Egypt from the Ottoman Empire and began to transform it into the region's first modern nation.

In the early 20th century, it was the forward-looking Wafd Party that rose in the aftermath of the First World War and established Cairo as the liberal heart of the "Arab Awakening." And just three decades ago, it was Anwar Sadat who showed the way forward for the entire Middle East -- beginning difficult economic reforms and making peace with Israel. In these periods of historic decision, Egypt's leadership was as visionary as it was essential for progress. And now in our own time, we are faced with equally momentous choices -- choices that will echo for generations to come.

In this time of great decision, I have come to Cairo not to talk about the past, but to look to the future -- to a future that Egyptians can lead and can define. Ladies and Gentlemen: In our world today, a growing number of men and women are securing their liberty. And as these people gain the power to choose, they are creating democratic governments in order to protect their natural rights.

We should all look to a future when every government respects the will of its citizens -- because the ideal of democracy is universal. For 60 years, my country, the United States, pursued stability at the expense of democracy in this region here in the Middle East -- and we achieved neither. Now, we are taking a different course. We are supporting the democratic aspirations of all people.

As President Bush said in his Second Inaugural Address: "America will not impose our style of government on the unwilling. Our goal instead is to help others find their own voice, to attain their own freedom, and to make their own way."

We know these advances will not come easily, or all at once. We know that different societies will find forms of democracy that work for them. When we talk about democracy, though, we are referring to governments that protect certain basic rights for all their citizens -- among these, the right to speak freely. The right to associate. The right to worship as you wish. The freedom to educate your children -- boys and girls. And freedom from the midnight knock of the secret police.

Securing these rights is the hope of every citizen, and the duty of every government. In my own country, the progress of democracy has been long and difficult. And given our history, the United States has no cause for false pride and we have every reason for humility.

After all, America was founded by individuals who knew that all human beings -- and the governments they create -- are inherently imperfect. And the United States was born half free and half slave. And it was only in my lifetime that my government guaranteed the right to vote for all of its people.

Nevertheless, the principles enshrined in our Constitution enable citizens of conviction to move America closer every day to the ideal of democracy. Here in the Middle East, that same long hopeful process of democratic change is now beginning to unfold. Millions of people are demanding freedom for themselves and democracy for their countries.

To these courageous men and women, I say today: All free nations will stand with you as you secure the blessings of your own liberty. I have just come from Jordan, where I met with the King and Queen -- two leaders who have embraced reform for many years. And Jordan's education reforms are an example for the entire region. That government is moving toward political reforms that will decentralize power and give Jordanians a greater stake in their future.

In Iraq, millions of citizens are refusing to surrender to terror the dream of freedom and democracy. When Baghdad was first designed, over twelve-hundred years ago, it was conceived as the "Round City" -- a city in which no citizen would be closer to the center of justice than any other. Today -- after decades of murder, and tyranny, and injustice -- the citizens of Iraq are again reaching for the ideals of the Round City.

Despite the attacks of violent and evil men, ordinary Iraqis are displaying great personal courage and remarkable resolve. And every step of the way -- from regaining their sovereignty, to holding elections, to now writing a constitution -- the people of Iraq are exceeding all expectations.

The Palestinian people have also spoken. And their freely-elected government is working to seize the best opportunity in years to fulfill their historic dream of statehood. Courageous leaders, both among the Palestinians and the Israelis, are dedicated to seeking that peace. And they are working to build a shared trust.

The Palestinian Authority will soon take control of the Gaza -- a first step toward realizing the vision of two democratic states living side by side in peace and security. As Palestinians fight terror, and as the Israelis fulfill their obligations and responsibilities to help create a viable Palestinian state, the entire world -- especially Egypt and the United States -- will offer full support.

In Lebanon, supporters of democracy are demanding independence from foreign masters. After the assassination of Rafiq Hariri, thousands of Lebanese citizens called for change. And when the murder of journalist Samir Qaseer reminded everyone of the reach and brutality of terror, the Lebanese people were still unafraid.

They mourned their fellow patriot, but they united publicly with pens and pencils held aloft. It is not only the Lebanese people who desire freedom from Syria's police state. The Syrian people themselves share that aspiration.

One hundred and seventy-nine Syrian academics and human rights activists are calling upon their government to "let the Damascus spring flower, and let its flowers bloom." Syria's leaders should embrace this call -- and learn to trust their people. The case of Syria is especially serious, because as its neighbors embrace democracy and political reform, Syria continues to harbor or directly support groups committed to violence -- in Lebanon, and in Israel, and Iraq, and in the Palestinian territories. It is time for Syria to make a strategic choice to join the progress that is going on all around it.

In Iran, people are losing patience with an oppressive regime that denies them their liberty and their rights. The appearance of elections does not mask the organized cruelty of Iran's theocratic state. The Iranian people, ladies and gentlemen, are capable of liberty. They desire liberty. And they deserve liberty. The time has come for the unelected few to release their grip on the aspirations of the proud people of Iran.

In Saudi Arabia, brave citizens are demanding accountable government. And some good first steps toward openness have been taken with recent municipal elections. Yet many people pay an unfair price for exercising their basic rights. Three individuals in particular are currently imprisoned for peacefully petitioning their government. That should not be a crime in any country.

Now, here in Cairo, President Mubarak's decision to amend the country's constitution and hold multiparty elections is encouraging. President Mubarak has unlocked the door for change. Now, the Egyptian Government must put its faith in its own people. We are all concerned for the future of Egypt's reforms when peaceful supporters of democracy -- men and women -- are not free from violence. The day must come when the rule of law replaces emergency decrees -- and when the independent judiciary replaces arbitrary justice.

The Egyptian Government must fulfill the promise it has made to its people -- and to the entire world -- by giving its citizens the freedom to choose. Egypt's elections, including the Parliamentary elections, must meet objective standards that define every free election.

Opposition groups must be free to assemble, and to participate, and to speak to the media. Voting should occur without violence or intimidation. And international election monitors and observers must have unrestricted access to do their jobs.

Those who would participate in elections, both supporters and opponents of the government, also have responsibilities. They must accept the rule of law, they must reject violence, they must respect the standards of free elections, and they must peacefully accept the results.



Throughout the Middle East, the fear of free choices can no longer justify the denial of liberty. It is time to abandon the excuses that are made to avoid the hard work of democracy. There are those who say that democracy is being imposed. In fact, the opposite is true: Democracy is never imposed. It is tyranny that must be imposed.

People choose democracy freely. And successful reform is always homegrown. Just look around the world today. For the first time in history, more people are citizens of democracies than of any other form of government. This is the result of choice, not of coercion.

There are those who say that democracy leads to chaos, or conflict, or terror. In fact, the opposite is true: Freedom and democracy are the only ideas powerful enough to overcome hatred, and division, and violence. For people of diverse races and religions, the inclusive nature of democracy can lift the fear of difference that some believe is a license to kill. But people of goodwill must choose to embrace the challenge of listening, and debating, and cooperating with one another.

For neighboring countries with turbulent histories, democracy can help to build trust and settle old disputes with dignity. But leaders of vision and character must commit themselves to the difficult work that nurtures the hope of peace. And for all citizens with grievances, democracy can be a path to lasting justice. But the democratic system cannot function if certain groups have one foot in the realm of politics and one foot in the camp of terror.

There are those who say that democracy destroys social institution and erodes moral standards. In fact, the opposite is true: The success of democracy depends on public character and private virtue. For democracy to thrive, free citizens must work every day to strengthen their families, to care for their neighbors, and to support their communities.

There are those who say that long-term economic and social progress can be achieved without free minds and free markets. In fact, human potential and creativity are only fully released when governments trust their people's decisions and invest in their people's future. And the key investment is in those people's education. Because education -- for men and for women -- transforms their dreams into reality and enables them to overcome poverty.

There are those who say that democracy is for men alone. In fact, the opposite is true: Half a democracy is not a democracy. As one Muslim woman leader has said, "Society is like a bird. It has two wings. And a bird cannot fly if one wing is broken." Across the Middle East, women are inspiring us all.

In Kuwait, women protested to win their right to vote, carrying signs that declared: "Women are Kuwaitis, too." Last month, Kuwait's legislature voiced its agreement. In Saudi Arabia, the promise of dignity is awakening in some young women. During the recent municipal elections, I saw the image of a father who went to vote with his daughter.

Rather than cast his vote himself, he gave the ballot to his daughter, and she placed it in the ballot box. This small act of hope reveals one man's dream for his daughter. And he is not alone.

Ladies and Gentlemen: Across the Middle East today, millions of citizens are voicing their aspirations for liberty and for democracy. These men and women are expanding boundaries in ways many thought impossible just one year ago.

They are demonstrating that all great moral achievements begin with individuals who do not accept that the reality of today must also be the reality of tomorrow.

There was a time, not long ago, after all, when liberty was threatened by slavery.

The moral worth of my ancestors, it was thought, should be valued by the demand of the market, not by the dignity of their souls. This practice was sustained through violence. But the crime of human slavery could not withstand the power of human liberty. What seemed impossible in one century became inevitable in the next.

There was a time, even more recently, when liberty was threatened by colonialism. It was believed that certain peoples required foreign masters to rule their lands and run their lives. Like slavery, this ideology of injustice was enforced through oppression.

But when brave people demanded their rights, the truth that freedom is the destiny of every nation rang true throughout the world. What seemed impossible in one decade became inevitable in the next.

Today, liberty is threatened by undemocratic governments. Some believe this is a permanent fact of history. But there are others who know better. These impatient patriots can be found in Baghdad and Beirut, in Riyadh and in Ramallah, in Amman and in Tehran and right here in Cairo.

Together, they are defining a new standard of justice for our time -- a standard that is clear, and powerful, and inspiring: Liberty is the universal longing of every soul, and democracy is the ideal path for every nation.

The day is coming when the promise of a fully free and democratic world, once thought impossible, will also seem inevitable. The people of Egypt should be at the forefront of this great journey, just as you have led this region through the great journeys of the past.

A hopeful future is within the reach of every Egyptian citizen -- and every man and woman in the Middle East. The choice is yours to make. But you are not alone. All free nations are your allies. So together, let us choose liberty and democracy -- for our nations, for our children, and for our shared future.

Thank you.

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