

Remarks by Secretary Albright

Excellencies, distinguished guests, and fellow democrats, good evening. I am delighted to be here. The company could not be better and the subject that has brought us together could not be more timely or important.

I want to begin by thanking Mayor Tobas for welcoming us and for making us feel at home in Istanbul, a city of enchanting beauty, a global crossroads, and the perfect place for a gathering of democrats from the Islamic world.

I want to express my appreciation to Emre for his leadership and that of the Turkish Democracy Foundation for making this event possible.

Thanks also to Hafiz Pasha and the UNDP.

It is fitting that one of our cosponsors is a specialist in democracy, while the other is a specialist in development.

That seems to me the perfect partnership.

So thank you both very much.

The people assembled in this room have traveled many different roads before arriving here.

Some of you have suffered years, even decades, of political repression.

Some have seen your societies torn apart by war or civil unrest.

Some are from societies deeply mired in poverty.

Many have had to contend with tension between the comfort of tradition and the demands of the modern world.

You are from Africa and Asia, Europe and the Middle East.

You are men and women.

You are so very different one from the other.

And yet you are united --because you are democrats; you are from countries that are predominantly Muslim; and you are politicians.

In some countries, including my own, the term “politician” is not always a flattering one.

That is because politics, by its very nature, puts those who practice it under a microscope.

It is your job to propose laws, formulate ideas and debate issues of public policy.

In so doing, you open yourselves to criticism.

Your motives may be questioned.

Your positions may be distorted.

Your ideas may be opposed.

And like me, you may eventually find yourself out of office.

But the job you are doing, the effort you are making, and the risks you are running are absolutely essential.

Because by acting as a public voice of the people you represent, you are making democracy work.

And at this conference, you will have a chance to share experiences and to learn from each other.

This has never mattered more.

Because predominantly Muslim countries belong within the global community of democracies and you are among the pioneers who are helping to move them in the right direction.

There was a time when people said that democracy could not thrive in Latin America because of its rigid hierarchical traditions and its penchant for caudillos or strong men as leaders. But today, every country in the region has an elected government except one.

There was a time when people said democratic values were not compatible with Asian customs, which emphasize respect for authority and the rights of the community. But today, democracy is the dominant form of government from Japan and South Korea to the Philippines and India.

We live in a time when some people argue that democracy and Islam are incompatible. But today, you are proving them wrong.

You are rebutting those who say democracy is impractical because order requires an iron fist wielded from the top down.

And you are flat out rejecting the excuse that democracy cannot be accepted because outsiders are trying to impose it upon the Muslim world.

As chair of the National Democratic Institute, I am a very small part of a global network that is helping democratic forces to expand their knowledge and improve their skills.

As such I am an outsider. So are many components of the network of which NDI is a part.

But it is not true that we intend or desire to impose anything upon anybody.

Even if we did, we could not succeed.

Because democracy is defined by the right of people to express freely their own views about who should lead their own societies.

How could that possibly be an imposition?

The truth is that, in any place at any time, it is dictatorship that is an imposition; democracy is a choice.

At the core of democracy is the premise that governments have an obligation to respect the rights and dignity of their citizens.

When that principle is honored, societies are more likely to rise above differences of wealth and race, geography and gender.

They are more likely to overcome the insecurities and fears that contribute to intolerance and violence.

They are more likely to benefit from the skills, ideas and labor of all their members.

And they are more likely to find partners around the world who will support and help them when days are difficult and times are hard.

Respect for the rights and dignity of every human being.

Nothing is more central to democracy.

And although I am not an expert, I would be surprised to find any principle more consistent with Islam than that.

Today, in the Arab world and among Muslims more generally, democracy is a focus of debate and hope.

More and more people are coming together on their own to express their thoughts and to assert their rights.

This movement for democracy draws its inspiration from many sources, but the risks and realities with which it must deal are entirely home grown.

It does not always receive much publicity, but it is nevertheless growing stronger.

It is opposed by a powerful status quo, but has the advantage of something even more powerful, and that is the idea of human freedom.

Some say it cannot succeed. I believe that, with time, courage and commitment, it cannot fail.

In closing, with your permission, I would like to thank by name all of the organizations and other entities that have contributed to this conference.

I do so because each deserves recognition.

But also because the diversity of the list is compelling evidence of the support this democratic congress has attracted—support, I might add, that it richly deserves.

In addition to the UN Development Program and the Turkish Democracy Foundation, which I mentioned previously, this conference is sponsored by:

The Kingdoms of Bahrain, Belgium and the Netherlands

The Governments of Ireland and the Republic of Yemen

The Foreign Office of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

The U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor

The Canadian International Development Agency

The Friedrich Naumann Foundation

The United Nations Foundation

The Westminster Foundation for Democracy

The Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy

The Rockefeller Brothers Fund

The Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation

The Turkish Industrialists' and Businessmen's Association

And the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality

That is an impressive list.

But democracy is an impressive cause.

So I welcome you.

I congratulate you.

I look forward to our other speakers.

And I wish you well.