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Barack Obama

Kenyan Civil Society Members Conversation

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President Obama: Well, hello everybody. Jambo. It's good to see you. The -- Well, this is a very good-looking group. So it's wonderful to be with all of you. My name is Barack Obama. In case you didn't know. I want to, first of all, begin by thanking Kenyatta University for hosting us here today. We are very grateful. And the Vice Chancellor is here -- Madam Vice Chancellor, thank you.

And before we get started, I want to point out that this is one of our first regional centers for the Young African Leaders program -- the Young African Leaders Initiative -- or YALI -- that we're doing. As many of you know, this is one of my labors of love here in Africa, an outgrowth of some of the work that we had been doing. Seeing the incredible contributions that young leaders were making in so many countries, we thought let's bring them together and give them opportunities to learn from each other, and network and access resources, so that they can, then, in their home countries, be able to accomplish remarkable things. And so we're really excited about that. So we thank the university for allowing us to use these facilities for these outstanding people.

I just gave a very long speech.

Audience Comment: We saw it.

President Obama: You're saying it was also too long? Is that what you're saying? She nodded. She was all like, yes, it was very long.



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So because you just saw my speech, it doesn't make sense for me to give a whole 'nother speech. I'm really here more to listen and to learn. But I do want to just make a couple of brief remarks at the top. And then what I'm going to do is I'm going to call on a number of you. I've got a few names already to get us started, and then depending on how much time we have, then I'll try to see if I can call on some additional persons.

America has historically been a country of people who participate in the lives of their communities and their societies. And it's one of the things that make us, I believe, a great nation. There's a famous French writer named Alec de Tocqueville, who traveled to the United States, and wrote a very famous book called "Democracy in America." And the point that he made in this book during the course of his travels was that what made America a democracy was not just that it had elections, but that it was a society of joiners and volunteers, and people who wanted constantly to be involved in making their communities better. And if there was an injustice, they wanted to do something about it. And they would form organizations and they would form town halls, and disseminate information -- so that what the government did was obviously important, but what was just as important was what individual citizens were able to do to create a fabric of mutual concern and regard and advocacy that would shape government policy and would shape how societies were organized.

And almost all the progress that America has made in expanding freedom and opportunity has grown as a result of that bottom-up civic participation. The civil rights movement, the women's rights movement, the movement most recently to make sure that our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters have equal rights, the movement to end wars, in some cases, the movement to provide better resources for poor children. And there's the halfway house movement, and the movement to -- the settlement house movement, rather, and to make sure that children and orphans were properly cared for. The movement to public education and public universities. The environmental movement.

So many of these things arose because ordinary citizens started to get together and speak out and press their demands on their government. And eventually, politicians responded.

And I got my start in public life not as an elected official but as a community organizer in a poor neighborhood in Chicago. And I would work with churches and community groups to try to improve the school system, or bring affordable housing. And we weren't always completely successful, but it taught me the importance of the voices of ordinary people when they come together to create a better vision for the future.

And that's why I think civil society is so important. And that's why I emphasized it in the speech that I made today. And this is something that I emphasize wherever I go -- democracy does not stop on Election Day. For a real democracy to work, and for a society to thrive and continually improve, it requires that people continue to participate. And there have to be laws in place to protect that space and facilitate people's ability to participate.



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Now, the good news is, here in Kenya, you now have a constitution that creates the space for such participation. Alongside freedom of the press, and freedom of assembly, and the ability to organize politically, these are precious freedoms that have to be protected.

Because Kenya is a young democracy there's always a concern that it might slip back and that space might narrow, despite what the constitution says. And I just want to say part of the reason why it's important for me to be here today is to send a message that we in the United States at least believe that civil society is important and we want to continue to affirm it, and we want to listen and hear what it is that ordinary citizens, working together, have to say about their communities and about their lives.

And if Kenya can continue to cultivate those habits of participation and citizenship and freedom, then the country is going to be better off, and it's going to continue to make progress for all people and not just some.

So with those opening remarks, what I want to do now is just open it up for conversation. And I have in my hand some names to call on. I may not get through all of them. I think you've been instructed to try to be relatively brief. In some cases, what I'll do is I'll respond right away to the comments. In some cases, I may wait and respond at the end. But this is designed not so much as a town hall, to ask me questions, it's more designed for you to give me a sense of the things that are important to you, so that I can learn -- and because I think this is going to be televised -- so that the Kenya people as a whole can hear as well.

And the only thing I would ask is that everybody be respectful. And one of the rules of good civil society I believe is that you're respectful of the people who disagree with you. And that's part of what makes civil society work. If you can have civil disagreements, and you can listen to each other and not just shout, that's what creates an environment that leads to progress over the long term.

And the only other thing I'm going to do is, because it's warm, I'm going to take off my jacket. You're free to do so as well. This is pretty relaxed.

Okay, so -- and we've got a few topics where we've got some civil society organizations that are already working on some of these issues. And one of the topics that hasn't gotten a lot of attention during my trip but I consider very important because it's part of Kenya's heritage, but it's also part of global heritage -- and that is the issue of wildlife trafficking, where active citizens are really making a difference.

And I'm going to call on Tom Lalampaa of the Northern Rangelands Trust, to tell us about what he's doing.

Mr. Lalampaa: Thank you very much, Mr. President. I work for Northern Rangelands Trust Entity, an umbrella community organization currently supporting over 30 community-based conservancies.



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We've had a lot of successes on the trafficking as well. But I just want to mention two high-level impacts. One is that we've been able to develop a model of a community conservancy that is unique, that has proven very successful, now widely accepted by the national government and the county governments. And all the model has is that, first and foremost, is that it is grassroots-rooted. It's formed by the local communities -- by the elders, the women and the youth in the villages. And so these institutions help to anchor good governance, gender matters, awareness, micro-finance for our youth and our women, s well, and many, many more programs, including the -- getting water. It's become an entry point for the national government and the county governments to deliver services to the local communities.

It's also structured in such a way that the political leaders take part in those institutions. So they are local community institutions that are registered with the government. And it's just amazing, because they are creating a platform for dialogue -- a platform for communities to decide where they want water, where they want help, where they want -- what they want to do in matters.

The second high-level impact, Mr. President, is getting conservation to drive peace and conflict resolution in northern Kenya. In northern Kenya, peace and security is quite elusive for many reasons. One is because of illegal firearms. Secondly, it's just because of the nature of the mistrust among our ethnic communities. And thirdly, also because of the natural resources -- pasture, water for our cattle. And so we've managed to get the conservation to drive peace and conflict resolution in northern Kenya.

I was telling my friend, Paula, here that when communities, local communities -- they want peace. There's no way the elephants live in peace. So that's what I'm saying, Mr. President, that all that has been made possible through the support of the U.S. government, and in particular, through the USAID Kenya.

Mr. President, we have a number of challenges, but I'll put them in terms of a kind request to you. One, we'd appreciate the U.S. government support to protect and conserve the remaining African elephants. I'm saying the remaining because we have lost many. You can help us in three ways. First and foremost is to crush demand and market, Mr. President. Not even reducing it. if we can, let's crush it once and for all.

The Kenya government -- the civil society, ourselves, and the local communities can only prevent poaching from the source, from being poached. But the markets and the demand, Mr. President, are far outside our borders. We are helpless. Please help us.

The other way you can help us protect and conserve the remaining African elephants, Mr. President, is to get the U.S. government be a member of the African-led elephants protection initiative. Currently, nine African states have signed to it. So it would just bring enormous support and recognition if your government can join it and also be a part of it.



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Thirdly, in terms of helping us conserve and protect our elephants, the remaining, is to help us deal with the ivory. The second request that I think would benefit all of us here, Mr. President, my request also is that if possible -- we notice this is discussed all the time, but our humble request of the U.S. government is to increase the international support for the international programs. And I have in mind, I talk about the U.S. aid that's involved, and any other U.S. government-related development agencies -- because it's from that pot that we are going to support conservation, that we can improve livelihoods, that we can support governance.

I always have a feeling that the USAID office, wherever they are in Africa, and in the world, they get massive applications, and they can only deal with so much. Lastly, Mr. President, I must admit the fact that the embassy's office -- the USAID offices have been very good with us and extremely supportive.

Thank you so much, Mr. President.

President Obama: Let me just say, first of all, Tom, you're an eloquent spokesman for your cause and that was an excellent presentation. The second thing I have to say is that everybody is going to have to be briefer than Tom. Just because I want to make sure that I get as many comments as possible.

The third point is, with respect to conservation, you said the elephants that have been lost -- 20,000 elephants have been lost in recent years. And part of the reason why civil society has to be mobilized around conservation is that if people have a choice -- if they see a false choice between their own livelihoods and conserving animals then the animals will lose. If they're organized so that they see that preservation and conservation enhances their lives, then we win, because they feel ownership and they will participate.

And that's why the organizations that you're putting together are so important.

Now, we've got another person just on this issue before we move to another issue -- Paula Kahumbu, right here. I could tell because she's got an arm band that says, "Hands Off Our Elephants." With the Wildlife Trust.

Ms. Kahumbu: Thank you, Mr. President. First, on behalf of all the conservation community -- and there are several people in the room -- thank you so much for your initiatives on the African elephant in particular.

More than 30,000 elephants --

President Obama: 30,000.



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Ms. Kahumbu: -- are being killed every year in Africa. That's one every 15 minutes. Your grandchildren elephants. I love elephants. I want the whole world to fall in love with elephants. And I started this campaign, "Hands Off Our Elephants," under the organization, Wildlife Direct, with the First Lady Margaret Kenyatta, to empower and mobilize Kenyans, Africans across the entire continent to save elephants. They are our heritage. They are our identity. And it's our duty. And it's not just Africans who benefit from this. The whole world benefits.

It's not been easy, but our work has really led to a change in the hearts and minds of Kenyans, and also the laws. We've been at the center of judicial reforms in this country. Our work has led to the arrest of one of the most -- what do I say -- notorious suspected ivory kingpins, Feisal Mohamed Ali. For the first time in Kenya, an ivory trafficker is behind bars. And that's thanks to support from your embassy, through Ambassador Godec, and many other organizations.

And while we're succeeding locally in Kenya, poaching is down, the problem across Africa is escalating, and the demand for ivory is actually exploding. We're dealing with a wildlife crisis alone. We're dealing with international wildlife crime. And that's why my organization goes after traffickers. We're dealing with people who are funding terrorism, and we're dealing with a crime that is fueled by corruption.

So we have two requests. The first is that you take this message back to the American people. We're often asked, how can we help. It's very simple: Tell the American people, don't buy ivory. It's the simplest way to help. Secondly, we request that the USA takes a lead in pursuing international wildlife traffickers with the same vigor and rigor that you apply to money laundering and drug crimes. And we believe that this can be done through strengthening your legal assistance role not just in the demand countries, but source countries and transit countries.

Because we know that the number of people involved in this crime is actually relatively small compared to those other crimes. And so we can crush this very quickly and end the war and save elephants for all of humanity.

Thank you.

President Obama: Thank you. Well, as you may have noted, yesterday one of our announcements was to be even stricter with respect to any ivory sales inside the United States. I mean, we really are cracking down on that.

And with respect to the international networks, you're absolutely right that there's a connection between corrupt officials getting paid, criminals being armed, and the ivory trade. You have this linkage that should be of concern to all of us. And it's international in scope.



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Most recently, the United States is involved in negotiations with the Asian countries, the Asia Pacific region -- something called the Trans-Pacific Partnership. One of the things we're trying to accomplish in the trade agreement is for many of these countries with still strong demand for ivory to start getting much more serious about the enforcement of their laws, and have it embedded in the trade agreements that we initiate.

So, hopefully, we'll be able to influence not just what happens in the United States, but also in some of the areas where the demand is heaviest.

Another topic where we've seen some progress, and this is something that's close to my heart because I've got two daughters, and close to Michelle's heart -- she's been involved internationally, trying to highlight the issue of girls' education with what we're calling the Let Girls Learn initiative that involves many of our international agencies -- is the issue of girls' education. Obviously I've made it a big emphasis in my speech here today.

So we've got a couple of people to talk about some of the work that's being done through civil society on this issue. And I'm going to start with Kennedy Odede of Shining Hope for Communities.

Mr. Odede: Mr. President, it's my pleasure and privilege to meet someone like you who believes in grassroots change. You and I, we share one background that you did social work in Chicago and I'm doing it in Kibera where I grew up. I grew up where it's really hard to make it. There's no hope, no dream. Many young men end up being -- go to crime. It's easy for them -- if they're not able to enjoy even tourism because they don't have a dream. There's no hope in them.

Mr. President, I was really having a hard time in my community, but we said, enough is enough -- and, yes, we can! We came together with a soccer ball and that became a movement that really circled around girls' education. We built the first school in Kibera called Kibera School for Girls and then started providing social services to men, too. And that became world-changing.

But my challenge is that how do you take a grassroots thing like this across Africa, and by having more partners joining that? Thank you so much.

President Obama: You know, organizations like yours, if you show that it works and you're creating a model of success, then it's more likely that it gets adopted in other places. People learn from seeing something succeed that people might not have believed before could happen. And if they see that a school for girls in Kibera, with all the poverty there, is successful, that means it can succeed anywhere.

So we're very encouraged by the good work that you're doing. Now, we also have with us Linet Momposhi. Linet is right there. Now, Linet is a student and she's here from Pangani Girls Form Two. Linet.



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Ms. Momposhi: Thank you, Mr. President, for giving me this chance. Let me speak with you actually of a friend of mine. At the age of 12, this friend -- she dropped out of school and underwent genital mutilation. In my community, after undergoing such this, the [inaudible] said, she is ready for marriage. She was married to a man older than her, twice her age. And now at the age of 15, she has three children. She's not able to care for them, for their education. She milks the cows in the morning and sells the milk so that she can have something to give to her children.

For me, I got an opportunity to be at a boarding school in Kakenya Center. I had all the chance to study and I had all the time. I learned to milk the cows for my mom and prepare my siblings to go back to school. But now I'm studying in Pangani Girls, and become the first girl in the center. And now I would like to be a cardiologist and study at Harvard University.

President Obama: That sounds good.

Ms. Momposhi: And also I would like to set an example to the girls in my community that a girl can really become a cardiologist. Thank you.

President Obama: That's wonderful. Linet, hold on. You were so inspiring. Give Linet the mic back. Linet, how old are you right now?

Ms. Momposhi: I'm 16 years old.

President Obama: You're 16 years old. And how did you come to be able to go to the boarding school?

Ms. Momposhi: I was helped by Kakenya, the Kakenya Center. And that's how I go to study in Kakenya Center. And my dreams started working in that center where I had a chance to go to Maryhill but I went to Pangani Girls.

President Obama: So there was a center there, and by you coming into the center, then you started having bigger dreams about what you might be able to do?

Ms. Momposhi: Okay, I never used to have big dreams like now. Before joining the center, I never knew what I was going to do because I never had any hope in life.

President Obama: Yes. So, Linet, I'm sure you're going to be an excellent cardiologist. So we're very proud of you. But it just sends a message in terms of why civil society is so important. So many of our young people who have a lot of talent, but they just don't know what's possible. And sometimes the most important thing is just to show them that this is what could happen in your life if you work hard. And when they have a vision about what could happen, then suddenly they're motivated, the same way that Linet is motivated. And she starts having bigger ambitions about what's possible.



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That's part of the reason why civil society organizations that create mentorship programs and programs for young people to interact in different professions and talk to people who have succeeded is so important. And in fact, in the United States I've set up something called My Brother's Keeper, designed to target disadvantaged youth so that they are connected to mentorship programs very similar to some of the work that resulted in Linet being inspired.

In fact, we have young people who are mentors at the White House and we connect them with all of our senior staff. And I have dinner with them and give them advice. I don't know if they listen to the advice, but I think they do.

Linet, you're a very find young woman. Congratulations. We're very proud of you.

So one of the issues, obviously, that's been of concern lately in Kenya is terrorism. This is an area where I'm working extensively with the government. This is something that we're concerned about internationally. And obviously given what happened in places like Westgate and Garissa, Kenya is a source of concern as well. But as I said in the press conference yesterday, one of the important lessons that we've learned is that you can't just fight terrorism through military and the police. You also have to change people's hearts and minds, and give them a sense that they're included in the society and enlist them in assisting in fighting against terrorism.

And so I actually think that it's important to include civil society in the fight against terrorism. That's what we're doing in the United States. That's what we need to do here in Kenya as well. And so we've got a couple of organizations that are here that I want to call on just to talk about the kind of work they're doing and what they're finding on the ground in dealing with this very important issue.

And I'm going to start with Hassan Ole Nado, who is with SUPKEM. He's the deputy secretary general -- which is a very important title. But, please, go ahead. And describe for us what SUPKEM does. Is it regionally located? Is it national? Or is it more along the coast? Tell me about what it's doing.

Mr. Ole Nado: Thank you, Mr. President, for this opportunity and also for having time with civil society in Kenya. The Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims is an umbrella organization of Muslim organizations in the country, particularly mosque and Muslim committees all over the country. And also, we now have community-based organizations that are working at the community level, but they found time to advocate and to be part of the Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims.

We are here, and we have been doing this work for the last two years because we are a little bit late in the journey, but we realize that it's very important for the community to be engaged. We have worked before by developing a Countering Violent Extremism advocacy chapter. That calls for community leaderships, calls for government engagement, and also brings other civil society organizations onboard so that we can be able to deal with this issue.



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As you have already said, terrorism is not about military or the police or other things. It's more of community issues. So it has both security and social aspect of it. And I really thank you because of the White House summit, which I was privileged to attend with Hussein Khalid of Haki Africa. And after that particular meeting, when we came back to Kenya we found an opportunity to engage with government. Because before that White House summit, the engagement or relationship between civil society was a little bit lower. But thanks to that conference, that really opened up the government to engage with civil society.

Through that meeting, actually, we have been able, as civil society, to engage government in the development of a national counter-violent extremism strategy. And I hope the government will [inaudible] the strategy very soon.

We know a number of organizations who have been involved in this part of community projects, like Haki Africa and MUHURI are currently facing some problems. And I hope through your engagement with the government, you'd be able to raise concerns of these institutions. I know that the American government cannot engage organizations that have relationships with terrorist organizations. And I that is one of the things that really think it is important to protect institutions or individuals who engaged in this particular work.

At the moment, we are also working with the returnees in this country -- we have young men and women who are somehow misadvised and found themselves in terrorist organizations.

They found a way of getting back to their country, and there are not clear ways of engagement. I work with the government of Kenya because they gave amnesty to those who are willing to be given the amnesty. At the moment, we are really engaging them, and the government is also opening up -- because at the moment now, they are also creating what they call interagency coordination centers at the county level where all arms of government are talking together before they take actions against suspected terrorists.

The Muslim community, the leadership are also now onboard and they are really working on the areas of counter-narrative, because there are two narratives here. There is the ideological narrative and there is the old narrative of marginalization and other aspects. We talk about perceptions in the narrative of marginalization -- they are real issues that we are calling the government to address those issues.

One of the issues is the lack of identification documents for young people. I think it is very important that that should too should be addressed. We have a collapse of the education system in the northeast because of terror organizations. And I hope, as struggle to find ways and answers of how to deal with this problem, it is important for USAID, which I know they've done quite a lot of work in this country, to consider getting into education much more by engaging communities so that communities can run community-based organization education systems in the northeast so that we are avoid getting terrorists of tomorrow. Because we have over 400,000 young children who are not going to school because everybody else is pulled from there, from the region.



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Maybe if I could speak for many days, but I really thank you for this opportunity and also for having time with the civil society organizations.

President Obama: Thank you. Before you give up the mic, let me just ask you a question. I'm glad that because of the White House summit that we had on countering violent extremism, that there was a more constructive conversation that was taking place.

I think that point that you make is so important, which is reaching young people early. What I hear you saying is, is that one of the problems that exists in certain parts of the country now is because of fear, in some cases, and some of the existing structures not operating as well as they should, that you just have children who don't have access to educational resources and a structure, and then that makes them more vulnerable to recruitment into an organization that can give them some sense of purpose or meaning, even if it ends up being a very negative one. Is that what's I'm understanding?

Mr. Ole Nado: Yes, it's actually -- that is what it is. Because after the unfortunate terror attacks of Mandera, and later on the university in Garissa, those who were targeted -- because those are targeting were doing it deliberately to create interreligious tension in the country. So we have those people, who are non-Muslims from the region, pulling out of the region because they feel it's no longer safe for them to remain in that region.

But by pulling out, the region has been exposed because it doesn't have adequate resources to address this gap that has emanated. So to me, I think one of the things that need to consider is we need to build local organizations that can really break that gap at the community level, it's more sustainable because they're communities at a lower level.

President Obama: Thank you. That's very useful. Somebody else I want to hear from is Fauzia Abdi Ali, who's with Women International Society.

Ms. Abdi Ali: Thank you. I must start by congratulating you. The speech was really, really good because it really advocated for issues of women, which is an area of passion. I'm not speaking as WIS today, I'm actually speaking as Sisters Without Borders, because I chair a platform of very inspirational women who work every single day in the field of peace and security, in particular countering violent extremism.

So the women come from different parts of the country -- from northern Kenya, from the coastal region, and even here in Nairobi. And now I engage mentees all towards ensuring we have a peaceful society. We empower women from the household level to understand prevention, to understand early warning signs of radicalization of their kids, to look at prevention towards stigma that is associated with those mothers whose kids have actually joined violent extremism, or even their spouses. We also look at empowering them through support groups where they can have a space to engage with other like-minded people and even learn from each other.



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And we also ensure that this cross-border engagement between those within northern Kenya and those within the coastal region so that they don't feel alone in this whole concept of violent extremism.

What is normally important for me is, when it comes to issues of peace and security, engagement with women is still minimal, and we're still playing catchup. When we are pushing for two-thirds, even within our own parliamentary systems, we are not looking at what these two-thirds will be doing. And for us, we are pushing towards them having some concrete things that they will talk about within parliament. And in particular is the issue of education. Because for the women in northern Kenya, their children are actually not going to school; they're not getting quality education. And as Hassan has said, this ends up becoming a society that has young people who are not well educated and are more susceptible to violent extremism.

Secondly, it's the issue of the economy. In places such as the coast region, this has affected the economy. And this trickles down to the household level, and it affects the woman's old economy within that structure. So how can we have even this conversation going on? And we try and link this to the national level.

We also ensure that these discussions around policy on prevention has a gender lens. Because the reasons why boys join and the reason why girls join is very different. But when we are searching for solutions in policy, we try and group them together. So sometimes, even when we are looking at issues of amnesty, we are not really opening up that space to understand if we are going to put a rehabilitation center, how do we make it different from when engaging with a boy and when engaging with a girl. So that is very critical for us.

One key thing I would love to put across is you started the first -- the conversation -- the White House conference in February, and it brought a lot more conversation here through the regional conference we had. And I wanted to elevate that. In terms of ensuring it's more sustainable so that it pushes away from just discussion is to push for a hub that can be placed in Africa. The hub we have is actually in the UAE, the United Arab Emirates -- which is useful for research and ensuring there's more conversation around how private sector gets involved, how civil society and governments can come together.

But we don't have such hubs in Africa. So in most cases, when you hear about capacity-building of CVE, we have to go outside Africa to get this capacity-building. So why not actually start thinking about either expanding the global center to have a hub in Kenya, or somewhere in Africa for easy access for even the grassroots initiatives and civil society to also be engaged.

Thank you.

President Obama: Thank you. That was an excellent presentation. Thank you.



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And I will very much take your remarks under advisement in terms of the possibilities of setting up a hub. The idea of women being actively engaged in countering violent extremism is absolutely critical. Mothers tend to be more sensible. I'm just telling the truth. And obviously the younger we're reaching children and giving them the sense that violence is not the right path, and that's being reinforced by their primary caregiver, which typically is the mother, and the idea of peer-to-peer support but also some peer pressure in terms of making sure that mothers are involved in steering their children in the right way -- I think that's a wonderful model. Very exciting. I just learned something there.

So I've got a little bit more time. What I'd like to do now is I'm just going to call on some people. But I'm not going to be able to call on everybody, so I just want to say in advance. But I'm going to start with this young lady right there, in the sweater. And please introduce yourself.

Comment: Thank you, Mr. President. I am the CEO for Kamak [ph] Girls Initiative. Kamak Girls came about because of a problem -- I came from a family that had 45 children; out of it, 35 who are living. Out of the 35, 20 were girls, 15 were boys. And out of the 20 girls, only 11 went to school, four of them up to secondary, and one now up to the PhD level. So my father was really for education. He really tried his best. But when he passed away in 2004, I realized as a bigger girl, number three, that I had work to do -- follow these girls who dropped out of school and see that they can live a more meaningful life towards education, health and economic development.

So I gathered the four girls who are with me, and we started visiting them and find out how they are living. Right now, I managed with my three sisters to take two to the university. One has completed and has gotten a job. One is in third form. Two to diploma level; one of them we pushed and we opened at a city school where she was married. And the other one went to forest school. And to point, one of them where she was staying, she reached a class 8 and she has opened an inner-city school.

President Obama: Excellent.

Comment Continued: Our next step is to evaluate -- when we evaluate, we get girls of their range so that they can see what these girls have done, and also help the girls in the particular area.

President Obama: Okay.

Comment Continued: Yes. And apart from that, I've worked for 34 years, but I've not gone very far because I started building our children from the [inaudible] and I started working and continue to. I have three children. They have not gone very far because I'm taking care of these people.



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So my request is that this group can move further so that whenever these girls are married, I can -- not only those girls of ours, but also the girls in that area can also see that they can do it. Thank you so much.

President Obama: Okay. Well, thank you for your good efforts.

This young lady right there. I ask everybody to try to be as brief as possible so I can get as many additional question as possible.

Comment: Thank you very much, Mr. President. I am here on behalf of the Devolution Forum. That's a civil society coalition that was set up early last year because we were very concerned about challenges to the implementation of devolution in Kenya. And so I'll speak to just, very briefly, four points. I have a more comprehensive memorandum.

But one is, we're very concerned about the structure development assistance on devolution. A lot of it is being channeled through the national government to go to the county governments, and this is contrary to the constitution which recognizes the two levels of government as having shared serenity.

Now, this is a ploy by the government to keep power centralized. It's really a method of controlling the governance structure. So we find that even with the U.S., some of your programs are being channeled in this way, through the national government, for the county government. And we find that this is bad for devolution. We find also the World Bank very much is channeling -- they are funding in this direction.

The other thing that I'd like to address is -- to do with the war on terror. We've noted that this an intergovernmental aspect to the war on terror. And because the security reforms have not been implemented to the pace that was supposed to be, we find that these intergovernmental institutions, such as the county policing authorities, the community policing, ideologically and even structurally have not been set up. Ideologically, we find that they are being taken as more information-gathering rather than community policing where communities get actively involved in their community policing. So we are very concerned that as the U.S. assists the U.S. government, are you going to look at the ideological foundations of the structures that will engage citizens and the country governments in the security process? Because if we don't do that, then it will undermine the war on terror and security.

I'll pick one more because I --

President Obama: Because you're running out of time.



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Question: I'm out of time. There's a trend in Africa where the civic space is being closed. And we're looking at countries like Rwanda, Ethiopia. We're looking at our country. And we're wondering, what's the response of the U.S. government? We heard your excellent remarks and sentiments, but of course you are working with a government that has demonstrated an intent to close the civic space. So what's your approach going to be as you consolidate your work with the Kenyan government in terms of supporting civil society? We're finding even support for civil society is not as rigorous as it should have been. Thank you.

President Obama: Well, those are all excellent remarks. Let me just broadly talk about devolution and then we'll talk about how we are interacting with the national government on civil society issues.

With respect to devolution, Kenya now has a constitution and it has laid out how devolution is supposed to proceed. That will be subject to interpretation and legal challenges and political arguments. That's probably not an issue that the United States will be weighing in on deeply. And the reason I say that is because we have a system of government with a national -- or federal government, and then state governments and then local governments. And the relationship between the federal government and the states, the relationship between federal law and local laws is extremely complicated and has been the source of constant democratic debate, argument, challenges, court cases. And that's been going on for 250 years now. I mean, that was part of the original issue in the formation of the United States of America -- how much power remained with the states and how much power went to the federal government.

So the challenge that we would have as an international -- or as an outside party as the United States of America is that how that plays itself out within Kenya is ultimately up to the Kenyan people. Because there are arguments actually on both sides when it comes to national versus state power. In the United States, for example, those who wanted to maintain racial segregation consistently used the argument that states have the right to do what they want, and the federal government doesn't have the authority to enforce civil rights laws that are discriminating against minorities at the state level.

And I actually think, in that situation, the national government needed to say to states that had segregation laws -- you have to stop. And national law and the rights of individuals that are in the bill of rights are superior to whatever challenges -- or whatever claims are being made for states' rights.

Now, on the other hand, there are times where the national government is involving itself in states unnecessarily, and imposing views that may not be properly adapted to the local region.



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So I guess what I'm saying is, is that that's an issue that's -- it would be very difficult for us as outsiders to try to figure out. What we can do is to say, consistent with democracy, you have a constitution; you should abide by what's in your constitution. And you can make your own decisions about the systems that you want to arrange and the balance between federal and state power, or local power or counties. And as long as it's proceeding in a legal process consistent with the constitution, we're okay with that.

So I just wanted to be honest, that's not probably an issue where I'm going to be asking the ambassador of the United States to get deeply involved in because it's just too complicated. Every country is going to be different in terms of finding that balance.

Now, the issue of civil society is different, because we do believe that if you have laws that restrict people's ability to organize and speak out peacefully, and participate in their government and petition their government -- if those become too restrictive, then that, in any society, contradicts the basic premise of democracy.

And I recognize that there have been some concerns about some of the laws that have either been proposed or are being interpreted in ways that appear to restrict the legality of certain activities by certain groups. Rather than to say specifically what we're for and against -- because frankly, I don't know all the details -- what I will say is this: We will look suspiciously on laws that say certain peaceful groups can't operate just because they might be critical of the government, for example. I mean, our bias as a country and in our foreign policy is to say that if a group is peacefully organizing and advocating for issues, that they should be able to do so without excessive government interference. Now, if the groups are violent, then that's a different issue.

But you heard me in my press conference yesterday -- I don't counterterrorism to be used as an excuse then to crush legitimate dissent. And we will guard against that as well.

So we have every intention to work on a whole range of common interests with the Kenyan government. There are areas where we have a complete agreement, and we will work through the Kenyan government in order to accomplish those common goals. We want to be helpful and supportive of the national agenda, but we'll also be working with NGOs and local organizations at the local level. Many of the organizations that area we have been supporting. And what we'll do is we'll make sure that in all of our interactions and engagements with the government, when we see an organization, for example, that we have determined is, in fact, legitimate and is peaceful, that it is in some ways being suppressed, we will speak up and we'll be very clear about it. So we're going to be engaged, we're going to be involved.

But as I was telling -- I met with some of the opposition leaders very briefly -- those who are not in government -- after the speech. And I told them, you have a legally elected government and we're going to work with that government, but we're also always going to be listening to all elements of Kenyan society.



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It was funny, though -- one of the opposition leaders -- I won't mention who -- was saying, you know, we really need you to press the Kenyan government on some issues. And I had to say to him, I said, I remember when you were in government -- you kept on saying, why are you trying to interfere with Kenya's business; you should mind your own business.

So everybody wants the United States to be very involved when they're not in power. And when they're in power, they want the United States to mind their own business.

I think the way that we are going to operate is just to continue to be honest and to promote the kinds of policies and interests that we believe in. But ultimately -- and this is probably a good way to close -- ultimately I just want to remind everybody that Kenya's prosperity, its freedom, its opportunity, the strength of its democracy is going to depend on Kenyans. It's not going to depend on somebody else.

There was a time, post-Colonial, Cold War, when the big major powers were constantly interfering and determining what was happening in other countries. And frankly, the United States sometimes was involved in trying to decide who should be in charge of countries. But that honestly has changed. Our policy is to respect the sovereignty of nations and to recognize that it's ultimately up to the people of those countries to determine who leads them and their form of government. But we are not going to apologize for believing in certain values and ideals. And I may interact with a government, out of necessity, where we have common interests. But if there are areas where I disagree, I will also be very blunt in my disagreement. And that's true whether it's Russia or China, or some of our European friends, or a great friend like Kenya.

The good news is that, over all, the United States and Kenya have so much in common, so much shared history, such strong people-to-people ties, that the disagreements we have, regardless of who's in power, tend to be far fewer than all the areas where we have work to do together.

But I'm very encouraged to see that we've got such a strong civil society that's going to help move Kenya forward, and also help create a stronger relationship between the United States and Kenya for years to come.

So thank you for being here. This was a great conversation.