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Transcript

A Democratic Future for Yemen

Tawakkol Karman

Nobel Prize Laureate 2011, Journalist, Activist and Founder of Women Journalists without Chains

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NB: Karman spoke in a mixture of English and Arabic during the event. Where Arabic was spoken, her translator's English interpretation is attributed to Karman.

Ginny Hill:

Thank you very much everybody. My name is Ginny Hill. I'm the convenor of the Yemen Forum here at Chatham House. Thank you very much for coming today. I'd like to thank the Independent Yemen Group, in particular Dr Al-Maktari, for organizing the event today, and also for CAABU [Council for Advancing Arab-British Relations] for their help in facilitating.

It's my great pleasure to welcome Tawakkol Karman. Tawakkol became the public face of Yemen with this year's uprising, and as you all know she is a co-recipient of this year's Nobel Peace Prize. She's the first Yemeni and the first Arab woman to win the prize. She's also a Yemeni journalist and a human rights activist who founded the organization Women Journalists Without Chains, and she is a senior member of Yemen's Islah Party. Thank you very much for coming.

Tawakkol Karman:

Thank you so much for inviting me to have a speech here. It's my honor to be here, and I am so happy to be in London to bring you the voice of women and youth in Yemen. I will speak in English. My English isn't strong, so if I have any mistakes please just correct me, or my friend here will [indicates translator].

Well, do you know many things about Yemen? And about youth revolutions, peaceful youth revolution which started in January 2011? After the revolution of Tunisia, after the step down of Ben Ali, Yemeni people, Yemeni students, decided that they will not lose this historical point. Through this historical point, they will gain their freedom and dignity. So, [the] step down of Ben Ali was on 14 January. On 15 [January], some of the students went to the Tunisian embassy, saying hello to them. On the sixteenth, we raised the slogan that 'the people want to step down the regime'. We also raised another slogan which is, 'Leave! Before you're forced to leave'. And that was something that surprised all the people in our country. Parties, tribes, army, even our friends, foreign friends from embassies. They came to my organization, Women Journalists Without Chains. They told me, 'Tawakkol please stop! What are you doing? You are crazy! Don't do that with youth and

with students. Yemen has a history, a big history of conflict. There is six wars in the North, there is some movements, separation movements in the south, which is [the] Southern Peaceful Movement. There is tribes, there is corruption, there is Al-Qaeda. And you will be alone. You'll just make the people face the guns and the heavy weapons. So please, be wise, and stop this revolution. Don't do that.'

We insist. We told them no, we will not lose this historical point. They told me you are alone, you are just ten, just a hundred. Could you guarantee that millions of people will come with you, like what happened after the unification of Yemen? I told them yes, we will. 'Are you sure?' I told them yes, we will. Two days, they kidnapped me from the street, and they kidnapped some of the students, and the revolution became stronger and stronger after that.

Then what you see now. You see millions of people, millions of Yemeni people, they are in the street, struggling under the same slogan, that youth and students they raised, which is 'people wants to step down the regime'. Even in the South. All of them convinced that this is the only way to re-back Yemen. When I say re-back, because we know our history. We know that it's old, thousands, before thousands of years our country was strong. Our country, they call it, it's 'happy country' – 'Arabia Felix'. And also we have a good history of democracy with our queens, Saba'a and Balqis. So we told them we will re-back our country, and they decided to be with us. All of us own the same dream, that Yemen must be happy again. Yemen must be a democracy. Yemen must be equal and uncorrupted country.

All the people came with us, and all the people suffered for this goal. All the people also sacrificed. We lost more than 28,000 people between injured and killed. They were just struggling, making their demonstration. Inside this big, and huge, and great revolution, all Yemeni people forget their problems, the problems that they've faced since 33 years. For example, revenge between tribes. The revenge between tribes shut down, and stopped. All the tribes, I said *all* the tribes. Most of them came to the tents, came to Change Square. Some of them, they didn't participate, but even both of them, they stopped revenge. Most of them, they live in one tent, eat with each other, sleep with each other, struggle with each other, and also died – or been killed – with each other. This is number one, this is just for example.

Number two: war in Sa'ada. It was, before the revolution we faced more than six wars, and it's also shut down.

Number three: the voice of Al-Qaeda, the voice of terrorists. Did you hear or listen to or know that there was even one attack against any west[ern]

interests through this revolution? The voice of Al-Qaeda also shut down because people believe now in peace. And so it changed the mentality of people in Yemen who was believe in violence before. But through this peaceful revolution, they believe not just that violence is just the way to take what you need, or to take your demands, there is another way which is peace. And also most of the youth, they are in the front line. Not like before – many youth, most of the youth were attracted by Al-Qaeda, especially between [ages] 17-22. They lead now in the street, and they lead the way of the country to gain freedom and dignity and democracy.

Number four: participation of women. Before the revolution – peaceful revolution – women was like nothing in Yemen. Any woman that want[ed] to participate in public life, that's good, but she has to struggle for that. But most of them, they have their traditional role. If she's educated, she has to be teacher, or doctor, and that's it, and with the women. If she isn't, and that is the majority, she has to stay in the kitchen. Even in the house of her father or her husband. That's it. And there is a bad phrase which is, 'woman has to stay in her house, from house of her father to house of her husband to the grave.'

But what happened with that after the revolution? You can't imagine. Ten thousands of women, they are in the street, sleeping in the street, building tents, struggling, leading the revolution. They are in the front line of the peaceful revolution. In the whole details of the revolution, whole details. In the demonstration, in medical field, in security, in everything. And she also been attacked because of her role in leading the revolution. They are, they [have] been also killed because of their role in the front line of leading the demonstration. Four of my colleagues, my sisters, we sleeping with each other, playing with each other, speaking with each other through Facebook, through social media; the women, they killed. They [have] been killed. Not just, because, not by mistake, it's by purpose, deliberate. Tufaha, Zeynab, Yasmin, Arwa. These four women killed, been killed, because of their role in *leading* the revolution.

So we know that this country, and the oil crisis, that most of you knew about it and learn about it. Most of them, most of these crises came from the dictatorship regime, from corrupted regime. And we know that the only solution is to step down this regime. And also we know that we achieve most of our goals through this revolution, before it succeed, most of it before it succeed, and we know and we believe that we have to continue our way. We have to keep in our struggle, until to reach to the main goal, which is building a new Yemen, building democracy Yemen, building Yemen best on

accountability, good governance, equal citizenship, democracy, human rights. This is our main goal, and we will achieve it. We pay our blood, and we suffer a lot for that. We take many steps for that, and we will not go back. Women, youth, men, tribes, everyone – we know now what is the freedom. And we will achieve.

[Applause]

So, why am I here in London? Just to give you a message from the people in the squares, from the people who have been killed, from my sisters, from children, from all the people, millions of people in Yemen they are suffering from the mass persecution that they suffer from [the] Ali Abdullah Saleh regime. They don't have electricity, they don't have oil, they don't have water, they don't have gas, they don't have anything. They just have something, one thing – their dream, and their will, and their act in the street.

So the message is, we don't want anything difficult. Just freeze Ali Saleh's assets. Just freeze the family of Ali Saleh's assets. Just freeze the high officials of Ali Saleh regime's assets. These assets, these billions of dollars, it's belong to the people. Who been killed by this money. He used this money to kill people. He used this money to buy weapons. He used this money to buy also snipers. And he used this money to continue in his chair, in power. Yes, he stepped down already, yes that, he stepped down already because he signed, but he still has the power because he has the money. Why don't you freeze Ali Saleh's assets until now? This is the question. Why? Why did you, when you listened to the voice of Tunisian people, that they want to step down the regime, the first step from international community was freezing his assets. Why did the international community make the same things when dealing with al-Ghaddafi and Mubarak, and now with Bashar al-Assad? I give you this question, you have to ask your government. You have to help people in Yemen. Because this is the only demand.

The second demand... [laughter] The first demand! That was only the first demand. I told you, just two demands. The second demand... I will shift to Arabic if you will laugh! Are you tired with my English? Ok, the second demand is: there is a resolution was published on 22 October, resolution from Security Council. This resolution said that it must be, there must be an independent investigative committee. So please implement this resolution. That's for war crimes. 2014, the number of this resolution is 2014. Is these demands of Yemeni people difficult? We don't want anything else. We will continue our struggle, we will achieve all our dreams, and we will, with you, with you we will build a new world. We are now struggling for new world, not

just for our country, it's for a new world, it's for peace in the world. And we know our responsibility, that we have to start from our country. So you have to do all your responsibility, and you have to push for that. I am here for giving you this message, and I hope that you'll listen very well to the voice of women and youth in Yemen, and I promise, we promise, that you will find a new country you can't imagine. As we surprise you with our great revolution, we will surprise you with a great Yemen. Thank you.