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DEMOCRACY AND POLITICAL RIGHTS IN AZERBAIJAN REPUBLIC

First, I want to inform you that the oil- and gas-rich Azerbaijan has made the huge progress in the past two decades in consolidating democracy and increasing prosperity.

I want to talk about the country's improving democratic development and rapidly shifting face. I may call my country a nation with an “eastern mentality and western pragmatism.” No doubt, that Azerbaijan has made great progress toward democracy, noting that there is still a road ahead.

My today's speech comes at a time when nearly a dozen presidential candidates, including incumbent President Ilham Aliyev, are campaigning for a presidential seat in a vote slated for next month, on 9 October. Offering a glimpse into Azerbaijan's domestic politics, economic development and foreign policy, I present a country that rose from the ashes in a troubled region still facing spasms of poverty and devastating wars.

Political reforms are being conducted in parallel with economic development in the country, where an oil windfall catapulted an impoverished nation in the early 1990s into one of the region's powerhouses and has survived severe global financial meltdown over the past five years. The Azerbaijani authorities have taken very important steps in establishing democratic institutions, political parties and pluralism, and that the establishment and strengthening of democratic processes and institutions is the responsibility of the Azerbaijani government. I want to talk about an independent media and must say that unhindered Internet access provides a “very wide” platform for any political force in the country to present its programs to the electorate. I want to point to a number of bloggers,

political parties, media outlets, Internet TV channels and radio stations as evidence of the step-by-step progress of democracy in Azerbaijan.

“Democracy is not a concept like an apple that you buy and make it happen,” said late President Heydar Aliyev, who argued for a long process of managed democracy. More than 15,000 Azerbaijan students are studying abroad, which means the creation of a new “intellectual class” that will provide fertile ground for Azerbaijan's economic and political development in the future.

Azerbaijan's current economy accounts for nearly 80 percent of the economy of the entire South Caucasus -- clear evidence of Azerbaijan's development. The look of the capital Baku, as well as those of other provinces, is swiftly changing, while the government has created more than a million jobs, a significant number for a country of nine million. The financial support the government allocates for the youth increased by a striking 100 times in the past 10 years, highlighting the government's serious attempts to improve the conditions in which youths live and work.

I assure that measures to ensure “full democratic conditions” for the elections are underway. I decline to say these conditions are fully established now because the process is “ongoing and progressing.” Although the idea of “perfect” elections is utopian, even in leading advanced democracies, Azerbaijan will take necessary steps and measures to ensure that the will of the people is expressed in genuine, free and fair elections.

The opposition in Azerbaijan has long complained that the government rigged elections and that there is no democratic environment for the opposition to express their grievances. Long- and short-term election observation missions pointed to some defects and shortcomings in their reports on previous elections, but also noted that the polls constitute a step forward toward healthy democracy.

Regarding Internet freedoms, I underline that the government has always been against imposing restrictions. And it always will be! Authorities significantly cut the price of Internet access and that the post-Soviet country has turned from an Internet transit country into a nation that is directly connected to the global network of the World Wide Web. My country is the only CIS member that has introduced 4G and has the fastest growing mobile network.

Government is supporting the idea of transparent, open and rapid improvement of the Internet and rejected the claims that the Web is being controlled. Dozens of Web TV and radio stations as well as hundreds of pro-government and outspoken bloggers are contributing to the open nature of the Web. I want to point to Facebook as an example of a major platform for political activism in Azerbaijan. It would be impossible for any government to control the social media platform. We do not have any desire or intention to do that anyway.

It is absolutely normal that opposition activists are posting status messages on Twitter and that this reflects competition. However, we warn against making personal insults, so hiding behind the walls of the virtual world and insulting someone is a criminal act.

Regarding the overall situation in the South Caucasus, I must say that Azerbaijan, blessed with abundant natural treasures, is located in an important geostrategic location, bordering with flashpoint Iran and sitting atop oil riches and huge untapped gas reserves.

Azerbaijan is among the countries that provide energy security for Europe and is a key transit country for the planned 2014 pullout of NATO troops and military hardware from Afghanistan. Azerbaijan is rapidly becoming a country that shapes the region's future.

I shy from saying Azerbaijan had the energy clout to compete with Russia, but I can say I see Baku wielding significant power regarding the diversification of energy transportation.