The Role of Civil Society in Kenya Today

By Hon Millie Odhiambo

Friends, Fellow Kenyans, Ladies and gentlemen, all protocols observed, good evening;

We gather here to celebrate this year’s Civil Society of the Year Award (CSOYA). This award comes at a time when most Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) are in the forefront championing for restoration of peaceful coexistence among Kenyans after the Post Election Violence. Kenyan CSOs have come a long way from the one party dictatorship where many were detained while agitating for restoration of democracy; to the multiparty era during which there was advocacy for a new constitutional dispensation; to the grand coalition era where there seems to be a clawing back on the gains that the civil society has realised for the country over the years.

The success of the civil society in the advocacy for a democratic Kenya whose institutions are responsive to people needs is far from over. The successive governments have paid lip service to reforms and indeed commitment has been flagging.

Today we find ourselves in a new social milieu; we have a coalition government which portends a different set of advocacy methodologies. When everybody in the political elite is in government, this is very confusing and may have stretched our advocacy strategies. In the 90’s when the call was “Moi must go”, the civil society found allies in the opposition and it was easy to mount national platform for pro-democracy crusades. Now it is different, and largely it is only individuals who can be relied on to push for reform agenda items.

As we speak the advocacy to end impunity and ensure justice for all is at the brink of being swept under the carpet by the political class in terms of unsuitable legislation and a characteristically incoherent din of commissions, taskforces and committees. We must then
strengthen our institutions and seek greater unity of the sector under umbrella leadership so as to get the required momentum for pushing of meaningful reforms.

Promotion and protection of fundamental human rights and freedoms of individuals and communities is key in any society. Civil society organisations in the Democracy and Governance sector have been doing advocacy around this issue and therefore recognition for them is perhaps the best thing that has happened since the formation of our nation state.

Having been in the sector for long time, I know for a fact that CSOs have been facing a myriad of challenges including:

- Unsatisfied community needs; high expectations, mismatched goals,
- Hostility and non-cooperation by some government agencies and individuals
- Lack of emphasis on civil and political rights including inadequate attention to basic rights.
- Gender inequality
- Ineffective networking with international NGOs
- Unstable resource base, particularly financial and other non-human resource
- Elusive inter-CSOs collaboration; urban-rural split, societal divisions, undemocratic organisational Structures

To minimise the challenges highlighted above, I would wish to propose strategies which might work if well thought through. CSOs may try;

- Resource sharing- jointly undertake activities especially advocacy related ones.
- Clarify and intensify collaboration with government institutions and the private sector.
- Enhancing the role of communities in local fundraising.
• Championing for effective aid from development partners

For the good work that the Civil Society has done and continues to do for the betterment of this the opportunity that CSOYA provides for us is that of recognising and rewarding our institutions.

All these years that organised civil society has existed have brought with them unique challenges for CSOs. With these challenges came new learning that led to growth and expansion of Civil Society sector in Kenya. This growth is being celebrated through the Civil Society of the Year Award.

I would like to unequivocally commend those organisations that opened themselves up for scrutiny. This is a bold move of accountability and is most welcome today since the disease of people, and especially the government, seeing civil society as idle self interested organs has not been cured. That is the way to go. I indeed would encourage CRECO to make the award a permanent fixture of the civil society and to explore ways of making it a certification issue so that the good practices in the sector can be lauded and sector-wide lessons can be harvested.

I pray that the precedent that has been set by CRECO is supported by all organisations and peoples of good will, not because of its singularity but because of the import it has for the sector. The development of a strong civil society sector is as important for any nation as the need for good governance and democracy.

Long live the civil society, long live CRECO.

GOD BLESS YOU ALL!