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“Democratic Transition in Myanmar: Challenges and the Way Forward “  
Delivered by H.E Daw Aung San Suu Kyi  
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Your Excellency Mr. Teo Chee Hean, Deputy Prime Minister and  
Coordinating Minister for National Security of Singapore,  
Professor Wang Gungwu, Chairman, ISEAS Board of Trustees,  
Honorable Director of ISEAS Mr. Choi Shing Kwok,  
Distinguished Guests,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me begin by congratulating the Institute of South East Asian  
Studies on its golden anniversary and by thanking the Director of the  
Institute for inviting me to deliver the Singapore Lecture.

I particularly appreciate the opportunity to speak here today on  
the challenges and objectives of our democratic transition as  
Singapore is the Chair of ASEAN this year. Our ASEAN friends have  
been generous with necessary help and support as we negotiate the  
passage of an intricate transition. They have demonstrated the value  
of regional solidarity based on shared experiences and aspirations.  
The premise that what helps one part helps the whole underpins the  
consensual, cooperative approach that has played a vital part in

making ASEAN one of the most successful regional organizations in the world, despite development gaps between its members.

A transition, to put very simply, is the process of going across from one point to another. The distance that must be covered, and the nature of the terrain that must be travelled define the scope and complexity of the challenges that have to be faced and overcome. Myanmar is crossing over from a long established, authoritarian system to one we label "democracy." Our people's perception, or rather, perceptions of democracy, varied, incoherent and inconsistent as they may be, impact on the transition that our country is undergoing today.

During the last three quarters of a century, Myanmar has undergone three major transitions: from colonial rule to independence in 1948, from parliamentary democracy to military dictatorship in 1962, and still in progress today since 1988, still incomplete, is the transition from dictatorship to democracy.

The first transition was a straight forward culmination of a hard and costly struggle: a clean-cut change from the status of colonial subject country to that of sovereign independent nation.

The second transition too was sharp and clearly placed in time: tanks on the streets of the capital one morning, a crisp declaration on the radio.

Our present transition is the most complex, the most challenging, of all. The very beginning was amorphous. There was nothing so definite as the lowering of one flag and the raising of another, no brief, staccato announcement, to mark the completion of one phase and the beginning of another, in the life of our country. Several incidents, each in itself seemingly, at the time, of minor importance, fused together to become the force that launched a nationwide uprising for democracy. The uprising was put down quickly but nevertheless, it opened the gates to the rocky, protean, transit path that we continue to tread today.

Democracy in 1988 meant for our people the opposite of all that they had associated with the Burmese Way to Socialism. A passion to slough off the oppressiveness of a one party system with undertones of military despotism seized the whole country. The people cried out for an end to declining standards, to drabness, to the erosion of individual freedom. In response, direct military rule was speedily instituted and individual freedom further curtailed, but political parties were allowed to sprout, although their activities were severely curtailed, and faltering steps taken towards an open market economy. From such an unpromising beginning, and after many obstacles and

setbacks, including a General Election in 1990 that fanned a brief flickering of hope, we reached the landmark elections of 2015. The National League for Democracy managed to win a majority large enough for us to form a government, within the constraints of the Constitution adopted through a questionable referendum in 2008.

When I speak of our democratic transition, I mean a democratic way towards a democratic goal, following a path laid down in accordance with the wishes of the people and maintained with their consent and cooperation.

Our people yearn for peace and security, for an end to unrest and strife, for material and emotional security, for a chance to contemplate the future of their children with tranquility. It was from a desire to see these wishes fulfilled that they accepted the principles of non-violence and national reconciliation on which the NLD was founded in 1988 and, nearly three decades on, voted for the goals set by our party: rule of law, peace, development, amendments to the Constitution. The degree of progress of our transition has to be measured by the extent to which we are able, together with our people, to realize our aspirations.

The Myanmar Sustainable Development Plan, which could also be seen as a roadmap for our transition, identifies five goals, supported by three pillars. Goal 1 is Peace, National Reconciliation,

Security and Good Governance and Goal 2 is Economic Stability & Strengthened Macroeconomic Management. These rest on the pillar of Peace & Stability. Goal 3 is Job Creation & Private Sector-led Growth, held up by the pillar of Prosperity & Partnership. The third pillar, People and Planet, supports Goal 4, Human Resources & Social Development for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Society and Goal 5, Natural Resources & the Environment for Prosperity of the Nation.

Goals 1 and 2 are interdependent and impossible to sustain without a solid pillar of peace and stability. Building this pillar we saw as the first task we had to address as we embarked on the path of transition. At the very commencement of our new administration on 30 March 2016, we took steps to implement our plans for taking forward the peace process that had been initiated by the previous government. The Twenty-first Century Panglong Conference seeks to put an end to the armed strife that has ravaged Myanmar since its birth as an independent nation, and to construct a strong democratic federal union founded on a lasting unity created out of diversity.

We had learnt from the experiences of other countries that the path of peace processes seldom run smooth and unimpeded. As ours was of unparalleled intricacy, involving more than the common number of players, we were prepared for difficulties and disappointments, setbacks and even breakdowns.

But we are determined to persevere because without peace, our transition could not blossom and bear fruit. There have been difficulties and disappointments as anticipated but incessant negotiations, endless patience, the goodwill of participants and the encouragement and help of our people and our friends have enabled us to keep moving forward. In each of the three Panglong meetings held over the last two years, we made valuable progress: in the First Union Peace Conference, a seven-step roadmap for peace and national reconciliation was achieved. In the Second Conference, 37 principles were adopted. Before the Third Conference, two more ethnic armed groups signed the ceasefire agreement and during the Conference itself, 14 more principles were adopted. Serious challenges remain and armed conflicts continue to break out between the Tatmadaw and the EAOs, as well as between the EAOs themselves. We are constantly alert to the challenges and we aim to resolve them through dialogue and negotiation, by persevering in the endeavor to build mutual trust and understanding.

A sound base for peace and stability has to be broad and comprehensive. Addressing destabilizing issues in Rakhine State was a fundamental part of building our Pillar 1. Within two months of taking on the responsibilities of government, we established the Central Committee for Rule of Law and Development in Rakhine and soon after, we approached Dr. Kofi Annan, former Secretary General of the United Nations, to head an Advisory Commission that would help us to find lasting solutions to the problems that were

jeopardizing peace and progress in a region so bountifully blessed by nature.

Please allow me, at this point, to pay tribute to Dr. Kofi Annan. His qualities and achievements were myriad but here it is only fitting that I should focus on what he meant to us as we negotiated the path of democratic transition. He agreed to take on the responsibility of advising us on how we might resolve deep rooted problems in the Rakhine because his nature was cast in a generous, positive mould.

He wanted us to succeed, to reach our goals of peace, prosperity, security and progress for our country. Dr. Annan abided by his decision to help us, even after events in the Rakhine brought down severe criticism on Myanmar. His compassion, his integrity and his courage shone through his acts and the recommendations of his Commission reflected his wisdom and his wide experience of the challenges of our times. His approach was constructive and caring. Despite the many demands on his duties, he made time to speak to me on the telephone occasionally, to ask how he might help, to listen, to encourage. One of the last public events he organized was a workshop earlier this year on 'lessons learnt' in Rakhine. His life is a lesson we could all learn to our profit. It exemplified the principles and values on which the United Nations was founded, the principles and values that allowed us to hope peace and prosperity might be possible for all in our world.

The recommendations of Dr. Kofi Annan's Commission, 88 in all, of which we have to date implemented 81, aim at the establishment of lasting peace and stability in Rakhine. But the challenges there are multi-faceted and require multi-tasking. Resettlement of displaced persons now in Bangladesh has to be effected through the implementation of the Agreement signed between Myanmar and Bangladesh last November.

The Government of Myanmar has also signed with the UNDP and the UNHCR an MOU that aims at assisting speedy and efficient resettlement and rehabilitation. We have already mapped out potential sites for the resettlement of returnees. UN officials have been granted access to 23 villages in 13 village tracts, selected as part of a pilot assessment programme and an additional five villages have also been marked out for the resettlement of IDPs residing near the borderline.

Involved at various fronts and levels is the Union Enterprise for Humanitarian Assistance, Resettlement and Development in Rakhine. It is an enterprise that brings together peoples and organizations from all parts of the country to work with the government to bring Rakhine into the orbit of our national plan for sustainable development.

The Advisory Board for the Implementation of the recommendations of Dr. Annan's Commission, chaired by Dr. Surakiart Sathirathai, former Deputy Prime Minister of Thailand, submitted its final report last week. I would like to express my sincere thanks to all the members of the Board for a balanced and viable report.

On their recommendation, an Independent Commission of Enquiry, led by Ambassador Rosario Manalo, an eminent diplomat from ASEAN, has been established. The Commission met for the first time in Nay Pyi Taw on 15 August and will be commencing their work next week.

We share deep sympathy and concern for all displaced persons, especially women and children. There are around four million Myanmar migrant workers and displaced persons at present in Thailand. Our two countries have succeeded in working together to resolve the issue amicably, in the spirit of good neighbourliness. Today, the majority of our workers have been legally registered and both employers and employees have benefitted from the improved arrangements. The return of displaced persons to our country is also working smoothly as a result of close consultation and cooperation between Myanmar and Thailand.

Similarly, we hope to work with Bangladesh to effect the voluntary, safe and dignified return of displaced persons from northern Rakhine. We have reached out to Bangladesh by sending Ministerial delegations to Dhaka and last week, the Bangladeshi Foreign Minister was invited to Myanmar to see at first hand preparations we have made for the resettlement of returnees. During his visit, both sides agreed, inter alia, to deliver on commitments made, to speed up implementation of bilateral agreements on repatriation, and to set up a hotline between the two countries at the ministerial level.

We also recognise the crucial role of the United Nations in addressing an issue of this nature. We facilitated the visits of the Permanent Representatives of the UN Security Council members together with representatives of neighbouring countries and the ASEAN Chair, Singapore. We welcome the appointment of Ambassador Christine Burgener as Special Envoy of the UN Secretary-General. She has already opened her Office in Nay Pyi Taw. We believe that our engagement with Ambassador Burgener will be positive and fruitful.

The danger of terrorist activities, which was the initial cause of events leading to the humanitarian crisis in Rakhine, remains real and present today. Unless this security challenge is addressed, the risk of inter-communal violence will remain. It is a threat that could have

grave consequences not just for Myanmar but also for other countries in our region and beyond. Terrorism should not be condoned in any form for any reason.

We thank all our friends near and far who are helping us in different ways to resolve the challenges in Rakhine and thus helping our nascent transition to succeed. At this critical time, members of ASEAN and other friends can play a role by helping Myanmar in the implementation of Dr. Annan's recommendations in such areas as strengthening rule of law and strengthening educational and health infrastructures to help promote social harmony and peaceful coexistence.

We who are living through the transition in Myanmar view it differently from those who observe it from the outside and who will remain untouched by its outcome.

For us, it is the broad, all-encompassing map of the future of our country as well as the small details of our everyday life. Our approach has to be holistic and inclusive. We necessarily have to prioritize, but we cannot afford to neglect even low priority issues. The outside world can choose the issues on which they wish to focus and, after Rakhine, the one that is attracting most interest today is foreign direct investment.

We place high importance on investment but within the context of our wider needs. We want Myanmar to be business friendly, an environment where investors can be comfortable and secure and where their interests can merge harmoniously with our development aims. Our new investment and company laws have been carefully crafted to promote best business practices as well as good governance. Procedures have been streamlined to remove bottlenecks and accelerate the implementation process. The new chair of the Myanmar Investment Commission is here with us today and he is ready to assure those who are interested that he is willing and able to facilitate business ventures. I shall not usurp his prerogatives. However, there are certain things he would like me to tell you.

ASEAN economic integration, coupled with innovation, free trade, people to people contacts and regional connectivity, presents us with immense opportunities. Myanmar's recent economic surge is attributable to trade and investment from ASEAN and other East Asian economies.

Myanmar and Singapore, strategically located at the crossroads of this economically vibrant region, have a pivotal role to play in ensuring the continued economic growth and prosperity of ASEAN countries. We can combine our comparative advantages to our mutual benefit and to the benefit of this region.

Myanmar is the largest country on mainland Southeast Asia and is endowed with both arable land and natural resources, from forest products and minerals to natural gas. It also has a sizeable population and a youthful work force.

Singapore on the other hand, is one of the world's most reputable financial and trading centres as well as a transportation hub. It is well-equipped with world-class infrastructure that includes sea and air links and telecommunications. It is not only located in the heart of one of the fastest growing regions in the world, it has a skilled workforce and technical know-how that makes it a leading investment partner in the region.

Foreign investment in Myanmar reached US\$ 8 billion last year and more than half of it came from Singapore. The future remains bright as Myanmar and Singapore work to promote trade through a bilateral investment treaty.

The investment that is paramount for our transition is investment in our human resources. It is also fundamental to our sustainable development plan. One economist observed that all of Myanmar's critical economic indicators at this moment are either favourable, or stable, or moving in the right direction. But which is the right direction? The right direction, for us, is the one that will lead to an improvement in the quality of life for our people.

Among the fundamental infrastructure requirements identified by our new administration in 2016 were roads and electrification, not only because these are among the basic requirements of potential investors but because they are also essential to our investment in human resources. Better roads mean better access to health and education facilities, and lighting provides new opportunities for our people to achieve their potential.

Over the last two years, nearly 3,000 miles of roads have been constructed or upgraded, with priority given to least developed regions such as Chin and Rakhine, and government spending on health and education has increased by 1.2 and 2 percent respectively. Some of the steps we have taken which may not seem significant to observers make a great difference to the lives of our people. For example, the number of midwives appointed by the Health Ministry has increased from two digits to four. In our villages the services of midwives are not limited to childbirth, they provide basic health care. By producing more midwives, and by using modern technology to raise their capacity, we achieve a significant improvement in the health of our rural population and our rural population makes up about 70 percent of our total population.

On the education front, the recently published report of the Myanmar Living Conditions Survey 2017, the first of its kind,

undertaken by the Ministry of Planning and Finance in conjunction with the UNDP and other international agencies, found that literacy has risen across generations, gender gaps in literacy have closed at the national level (the rise in average literacy was predominantly driven by women) and school enrollment rates have been rising steadily. The survey covers population and demographics, energy and electricity, assets and household materials, water and sanitation, technology including mobile phone, computer and internet, education and labour. In its own words “the report documents some stark overtime changes in lighting, education, goods ownership and technology usage – but ... progress still needs to be made in some parts of the country where outcomes are lagging.”

The Myanmar Living Conditions Report deals with measurables. There are also unmeasurables, which are not just indicators of present conditions but also of future prospects. As the time has almost come for me to conclude the lecture, I will just mention one of the most important indicators: perhaps I might even say the most important indicator, which is the potential of our young people.

Over recent weeks I have had the opportunity to meet informally with schoolchildren, ranging from primary to upper secondary school level. Physically, they were not as well grown as they should have been, reflecting the problem of malnutrition, an

issue that the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Social Welfare are addressing as a priority. But how delightful they were! Bright, polite but not shy, eager to show off what they knew but with an awareness that there was still much they did not know. Willing to learn, immensely teachable. What glittering prizes might such children not win for our country? Let us take a look: The First Global Challenge Robotic Competition held in Washington DC in July 2017. 163 entrants from 157 countries competed and the team of engineering students from Myanmar came out sixth, first among all the Asian countries. It was a triumph of innovation and teamwork. It was an indicator of our potential, of how we shall find the resources to overcome the challenges of our transition.

The greatest strength of a democratic transition, the involvement of the people, is also its greatest challenge. To weld together the will and purpose of millions into a whole that allows the wonderful diversity of our country to shine through is a formidable undertaking. I believe that our people have the capacity to meet this challenge and to carry the transition to a successful conclusion which will be the starting point of a new, better era for our nation. And I believe that our ASEAN friends will be with us as we continue on our journey.

Before I conclude, I would like to invite all our friends to join us in our journey. Our journey is not a simple journey. It is an

adventure, an adventure into the unknown future. It is an adventure we are all taking part in. We have many challenges to face, many weaknesses that we must address. But we have confidence, confidence in the abilities of our people, and the capability of our people to grow into these challenges. We have mentioned amongst the challenges we have to face, I have mentioned earlier that amendments to the constitution is one of the goals of our government and this is something we have to mention here, because the completion of democratic transition must necessarily involve the completion of a truly democratic constitution. This, we have yet achieved, but we aim to achieve it through negotiations and through evolution. During my time in the legislature, from 2012 to 2015, we discussed amendments of the constitution. We were of course a minority then, but we put forward our ideas, the parts of the constitution which we believe would have to be amended if we are to truly be a democratic society, but we also made it quite clear that these changes we will bring up, we will bring about through negotiations, always keeping in mind that national reconciliation is one of our greatest needs. A country with 135 ethnic groups, how can we forward without learning how to live with diverse ideas, diverse customs, diverse aspirations.

To do that, we must learn to talk to one another, also to listen to one another. I am very grateful of the opportunity of talking to you today, and I hope that you have been listening. We have often found

that listening requires more than sitting in a room and letting sound flow in. we would like to listen with understanding, listen with empathy, listen by putting ourselves in our place, not the place of the government, but in the place of our ordinary people, of the citizens in the streets of our towns, in the villages, in the fields. If you listen with their ears, and try to see with their eyes, you would have a better ideas of what the real challenges of our transition are. They are not just the challenges the world sees, but the challenges that each and every one of our people see for himself or herself. I am confident that ASEAN, better than any other parts of the world will understand our needs, because we have been through the same experiences of colonialism, of nation building, of trying to develop an undeveloped economy, of trying to educate an uneducated citizenship. We have been one of the best educated country in Southeast Asia, but now we are trying to rebuild again. We are trying to put our people where they were in the days when Myanmar was considered one of the fastest developing nation in Asia. But we are not resting on our laurels. That will not do us any good. We want to move forward and we think we have the capacity to go forward, leapfrog is the word that is often used today, but I am not always happy with that. It seems to imply that we are following the same obstacle course others has done before us. Our obstacle course is different from that of others. So instead of leapfrogging, I think I would like to think of perhaps flyover the obstacles, that might be a better help and that might be able to take us quickly to our goals. The democratic transition actually have not been in place for 30 years. That is a long

time and I would like to see the time we complete it come soon, and come in a harmonious and tranquil manner with the help of our well-wishers all over the world.

Thank you.